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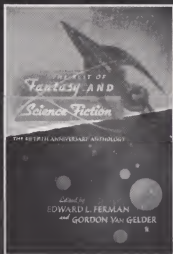
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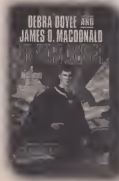
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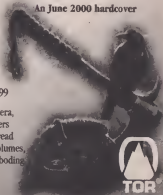


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Tananarive Due lives in Washington state with her husband, sf writer Steven Barnes. Her first two novels, The Between and My Soul to Keep, were dark fantasies that both were nominated for the Bram Stoker award. Her third novel, a chronicle of the Madam C. J. Walker's life entitled The Black Rose, has just been published and her next dark fantasy, The Living Blood, is due out in 2001.

Writing four novels in six years hasn't left her with much time for shorter stories, but Ms. Due does have one coming soon in Dark Matter, an anthology of sf and fantasy stories by African-American writers. And her affecting F&SF debut will likely have you hoping she turns more often to the shorter forms.

Patient Zero

By Tananarive Due

September 19

THE PICTURE CAME! VERONICA tapped on my glass and woke me up, and she held it up for me to see. It's autographed and everything! For you, Veronica mouthed at

me, and she smiled a really big smile. The autograph says, TO JAY — I'LL THROW A TOUCHDOWN FOR YOU. I couldn't believe it. Everybody is laughing at me because of the way I yelled and ran in circles around my room until I fell on the floor and scraped my elbow. The janitor, Lou, turned on the intercom box outside my door and said, "Kid, you gone crazier than usual? What you care about that picture for?"

Don't they know Dan Marino is the greatest quarterback of all time? I taped the picture to the wall over my bed. On the rest of my wall I have maps of the United States, and the world, and the solar system. I can find Corsica on the map, and the Palau Islands, which most people have never heard of, and I know what order all the planets are in. But there's nothing else on my wall like Dan Marino. That's the best. The other best thing I have is the cassette tape from that time the President called me on the

telephone when I was six. He said, "Hi, is Jay there? This is the President of the United States." He sounded just like on TV. My heart flipped, because it's so weird to hear the President say your name. I couldn't think of anything to say back. He asked me how I was feeling, and I said I was fine. That made him laugh, like he thought I was making a joke. Then his voice got real serious, and he said everyone was praying and thinking about me, and he hung up. When I listen to that tape now, I wish I had thought of something else to say. I used to think he might call me another time, but it only happened once, in the beginning. So I guess I'll never have a chance to talk to the President again.

After Veronica gave me my picture of Marino, I asked her if she could get somebody to fix my TV so I can see the football games. All my TV can play is videos. Veronica said there aren't any football games, and I started to get mad because I hate it when they lie. It's September, I said, and there's always football games in September. But Veronica told me the NFL people had a meeting and decided not to have football anymore, and maybe it would start again, but she wasn't sure, because nobody except me was thinking about football. At first, after she said that, it kind of ruined the autograph, because it seemed like Dan Marino must be lying, too. But Veronica said he was most likely talking about throwing a touchdown for me in the future, and I felt better then.

This notebook is from Ms. Manigat, my tutor, who is Haitian. She said I should start writing down my thoughts and everything that happens to me. I said I don't have any thoughts, but she said that was ridiculous. That is her favorite word, ridiculous.

Oh, I should say I'm ten today. If I were in a regular school, I would be in fifth grade like my brother was. I asked Ms. Manigat what grade I'm in, and she said I don't have a grade. I read like I'm in seventh grade and I do math like I'm in fourth grade, she says. She says I don't exactly fit anywhere, but I'm very smart. Ms. Manigat comes every day, except on weekends. She is my best friend, but I have to call her Ms. Manigat instead of using her first name, which is Emmeline, because she is so proper. She is very neat and wears skirts and dresses, and everything about her is very clean except her shoes, which are dirty. Her shoes are supposed to be white, but whenever I see her standing outside of the glass, when she hasn't put on her plastic suit yet, her shoes look brown and muddy.

Those are my thoughts.

September 20

I had a question today. Veronica never comes on Fridays, and the other nurse, Rene, isn't as nice as she is, so I waited for Ms. Manigat. She comes at one. I said, "You know how they give sick children their last wish when they're dying? Well, when Dr. Ben told me to think of the one thing I wanted for my birthday, I said I wanted an autograph from Dan Marino, so does that mean I'm dying and they're giving me my wish?" I said this really fast.

I thought Ms. Manigat would say I was being ridiculous. But she smiled. She put her hand on top of my head, and her hand felt stiff and heavy inside her big glove. "Listen, little old man," she said, which is what she calls me because she says I do so much worrying, "You're a lot of things, but you aren't dying. When everyone can be as healthy as you, it'll be a happy day."

The people here always seems to be waiting, and I don't know what for. I thought maybe they were waiting for me to die. But I believe Ms. Manigat. If she doesn't want to tell me something, she just says, "Leave it alone, Jay," which is her way of letting me know she would rather not say anything at all than ever tell a lie.

October 5

The lights in my room started going on and off again today, and it got so hot I had to leave my shirt off until I went to bed. Ms. Manigat couldn't do her lessons the way she wanted because of the lights not working right. She said it was the emergency generator. I asked her what the emergency was, and she said something that sounded funny: "Same old same old." That was all she said. I asked her if the emergency generator was the reason Dr. Ben took the television out of my room, and she said yes. She said everyone is conserving energy, and I have to do my part, too. But I miss my videos. There is nothing at all to do when I can't watch my videos. I hate it when I'm bored. Sometimes I'll even watch videos I've seen a hundred times, *really* a hundred times. I've seen *Big* with Tom Hanks more times than any other video. I love the part in the toy store with the really big piano keys on the floor. My mom taught me how to play Three Blind Mice on our piano at home, and it reminds me of that. I've never seen a toy store like the one in *Big*. I thought it was just a made-up place, but Ms. Manigat said it was a real toy store in New York.

I miss my videos. When I'm watching them, it's like I'm inside the movie, too. I hope Dr. Ben will bring my TV back soon.

October 22

I made Veronica cry yesterday. I didn't mean to. Dr. Ben said he knows it was an accident, but I feel very sorry, so I've been crying too. What happened is, I was talking to her, and she was taking some blood out of my arm with a needle like always. I was telling her about how me and my dad used to watch Marino play on television, and then all of a sudden she was crying really hard.

She dropped the needle on the floor and she was holding her wrist like she broke it. She started swearing. She said *Goddammit, goddammit, goddammit*, over and over, like that. I asked her what happened, and she pushed me away like she wanted to knock me over. Then she went to the door and punched the number code really fast and she pulled on the doorknob, but the door wouldn't open, and I heard something in her arm snap from yanking so hard. She had to do the code again. She was still crying. I've never seen her cry.

I didn't know what happened. I mashed my finger on the buzzer hard, but everybody ignored me. It reminded me of when I first came here, when I was always pushing the buzzer and crying, and nobody would ever come for a long time, and they were always in a bad mood when they came.

Anyway, I waited for Ms. Manigat, and when I told her about Veronica, she said she didn't know anything because she comes from the outside, but she promised to find out. Then she made me recite the Preamble to the Constitution, which I know by heart. Pretty soon, for a little while, I forgot about Veronica.

After my lessons, Ms. Manigat left and called me on my phone an hour later, like she promised. She always keeps her promises. My telephone is hooked up so people on the inside can call me, but I can't call anybody, inside or outside. It hardly ever rings now. But I almost didn't want to pick it up. I was afraid of what Ms. Manigat would say.

"Veronica poked herself," Ms. Manigat told me. "The needle stuck through her hot suit. She told Dr. Ben there was a sudden movement."

I wondered who made the sudden movement, Veronica or me?

"Is she okay?" I asked. I thought maybe Ms. Manigat was mad at me, because she has told me many times that I should be careful. Maybe I wasn't being careful when Veronica was here.

"We'll see, Jay," Ms. Manigat said. From her voice, it sounded like the answer was *no*.

"Will she get sick?" I asked.

"Probably, yes, they think so," Ms. Manigat said.

I didn't want her to answer any more questions. I like it when people tell me the truth, but it always makes me feel bad, too. I tried to say I was sorry, but I couldn't even open my mouth.

"It's not your fault, Jay," Ms. Manigat said.

I couldn't help it. I sobbed like I used to when I was still a little kid.

"Veronica knew something like this could happen," she said.

But that didn't make anything better, because I remembered how Veronica's face looked so scared inside her mask, and how she pushed me away. Veronica has been here since almost the beginning, before Ms. Manigat came, and she used to smile at me even when nobody else did. When she showed me my picture from Dan Marino, she looked almost as happy as me. I had never seen her whole face smiling like that. She looked so pretty and glad.

I was crying so much I couldn't even write down my thoughts like Ms. Manigat said to. Not until today.

November 4

A long time ago, when I first came here and the TV in my room played programs from outside, I saw the first-grade picture I had taken at school on TV. I always hated that picture because Mom put some greasy stuff in my hair that made me look like a total geek. And then I turned on the TV and saw that picture on the news! The man on TV said the names of everyone in our family, and even spelled them out on the screen. Then, he called me Patient Zero. He said I was the first person who got sick.

But that wasn't really what happened. My dad was sick before me. I've told them that already. He got it away on his job in Alaska. My dad traveled a lot because he drilled for oil, but he came home early that time. We weren't expecting him until Christmas, but he came when it was only September, close to my birthday. He said he'd been sent home because

some people on his oil crew got sick. One of them had even died. But the doctor in Alaska had looked at my dad and said he was fine, and then his boss sent him home. Dad was really mad about that. He hated to lose money. Time away from a job was always losing money, he said. He was in a bad mood when he wasn't working.

And the worse thing was, my dad wasn't fine. After two days, his eyes got red and he started sniffing. Then I did, too. And then my mom and brother.

When the man on TV showed my picture and called me Patient Zero and said I was the first one to get sick, that was when I first learned how people tell lies, because that wasn't true. Somebody on my dad's oil rig caught it first, and then he gave it to my dad. And my dad gave it to me, my mom and my brother. But one thing he said was right. I was the only one who got well.

My Aunt Lori came here to live at the lab with me at first, but she wasn't here long, because her eyes had already turned red by then. She came to help take care of me and my brother before my mom died, but probably she shouldn't have done that. She lived all the way in California, and I bet she wouldn't have gotten sick if she hadn't come to Miami to be with us. But even my mom's doctor didn't know what was wrong then, so nobody could warn her about what would happen if she got close to us. Sometimes I dream I'm calling Aunt Lori on my phone, telling her please, please not to come. Aunt Lori and my mom were twins. They looked exactly alike.

After Aunt Lori died, I was the only one left in my whole family.

I got very upset when I saw that news report. I didn't like hearing someone talk about my family like that, people who didn't even know us. And I felt like maybe the man on TV was right, and maybe it was all my fault. I screamed and cried the whole day. After that, Dr. Ben made them fix my TV so I couldn't see the news anymore or any programs from outside, just cartoons and kid movies on video. The only good thing was, that was when the President called me. I think he was sorry when he heard what happened to my family.

When I ask Dr. Ben if they're still talking about me on the news, he just shrugs his shoulders. Sometimes Dr. Ben won't say yes or no if you ask him a question. It doesn't matter, though. I think the TV people probably

stopped showing my picture a long time ago. I was just a little kid when my family got sick. I've been here four whole years!

Oh, I almost forgot. Veronica isn't back yet.

November 7

I have been staring at my Dan Marino picture all day, and I think the handwriting on the autograph looks like Dr. Ben's. But I'm afraid to ask anyone about that. Oh, yeah — and yesterday the power was off in my room for a whole day! Same old same old. That's what Ms. M. would say.

November 12

Ms. Manigat is teaching me a little bit about medicine. I told her I want to be a doctor when I grow up, and she said she thinks that's a wonderful idea because she believes people will always need doctors. She says I will be in a good position to help people, and I asked her if that's because I have been here so long, and she said yes.

The first thing she taught me is about diseases. She says in the old days, a long time ago, diseases like typhoid used to kill a lot of people because of unsanitary conditions and dirty drinking water, but people got smarter and doctors found drugs to cure it, so diseases didn't kill people as much anymore. Doctors are always trying to stay a step ahead of disease, Ms. Manigat says.

But sometimes they can't. Sometimes a new disease comes. Or, maybe it's not a new disease, but an old disease that has been hidden for a long time until something brings it out in the open. She said that's how nature balances the planet, because as soon as doctors find cures for one thing, there is always something new. Dr. Ben says my disease is new. There is a long name for it I can't remember how to spell, but most of the time people here call it Virus-J.

In a way, see, it's named after me. That's what Dr. Ben said. But I don't like that.

Ms. Manigat said after my dad came home, the virus got in my body and attacked me just like everyone else, so I got really, really sick for a lot of days. Then, I thought I was completely better. I stopped feeling bad at all. But the virus was already in my brother and my mom and dad, and even our doctor from before, Dr. Wolfe, and Ms. Manigat says it was very

aggressive, which means doctors didn't know how to kill it.

Everybody wears yellow plastic suits and airtight masks when they're in my room because the virus is still in the air, and it's in my blood, and it's on my plates and cups whenever I finish eating. They call the suits hot suits because the virus is *hot* in my room. Not hot like fire, but dangerous.

Ms. Manigat says Virus-J is extra special in my body because even though I'm not sick anymore, except for when I feel like I have a temperature and I have to lie down sometimes, the virus won't go away. I can make other people sick even when I feel fine, so she said that makes me a carrier. Ms. Manigat said Dr. Ben doesn't know anybody else who's gotten well except for me.

Oh, except maybe there are some little girls in China. Veronica told me once there were some little girls in China the same age as me who didn't get sick either. But when I asked Dr. Ben, he said he didn't know if it was true. And Ms. Manigat told me it might have been true once, but those girls might not be alive anymore. I asked her if they died of Virus-J, and she said no, no, no. Three times. She told me to forget all about any little girls in China. Almost like she was mad.

I'm the only one like me she knows about for sure, she says. The only one left.

That's why I'm here, she says. But I already knew that part. When I was little, Dr. Ben told me about antibodies and stuff in my blood, and he said the reason him and Rene and Veronica and all the other doctors take so much blood from me all the time, until they make purple bruises on my arms and I feel dizzy, is so they can try to help other people get well, too. I have had almost ten surgeries since I have been here. I think they have even taken out parts of me, but I'm not really sure. I look the same on the outside, but I feel different on the inside. I had surgery on my belly a year ago, and sometimes when I'm climbing the play-rope hanging from the ceiling in my room, I feel like it hasn't healed right, like I'm still cut open. Ms. Manigat says that's only in my mind. But it really hurts! I don't hate anything like I hate operations. I wonder if that's what happened to the other little girls, if they kept getting cut up and cut up until they died. Anyway, it's been a year since I had any operations. I keep telling Dr. Ben they can have as much blood as they want, but I don't want any more operations, please.

Dr. Ben said there's nobody in the world better than me to make people well, if only they can figure out how. Ms. Manigat says the same thing. That makes me feel a little better about Virus-J.

I was happy Ms. Manigat told me all about disease, because I don't want her to treat me like a baby the way everybody else does. That's what I always tell her. I like to know things.

I didn't even cry when she told me Veronica died. Maybe I got all my crying over with in the beginning, because I figured out a long time ago nobody gets better once they get sick. Nobody except for me.

November 14

Today, I asked Ms. Manigat how many people have Virus-J.

"Oh, Jay, I don't know," she said. I don't think she was in the mood to talk about disease.

"Just guess," I said.

Ms. Manigat thought for a long time. Then she opened her notebook and began drawing lines and boxes for me to see. Her picture looked like the tiny brown lines all over an oak-tree leaf. We had a tree called a live oak in our backyard, and my dad said it was more than a hundred years old. He said trees sometimes live longer than people do. And he was right, because I'm sure that tree is still standing in our yard even though my whole family is gone.

"This is how it goes, Jay," Ms. Manigat said, showing me with her pencil-tip how one line branched down to the next. "People are giving it to each other. They don't usually know they're sick for two weeks, and by then they've passed it to a lot of other people. By now, it's already been here four years, so the same thing that happened to your family is happening to a lot of families."

"How many families?" I asked again. I tried to think of the biggest number I could. "A million?"

Ms. Manigat shrugged just like Dr. Ben would. Maybe that meant yes.

I couldn't imagine a million families, so I asked Ms. Manigat if it happened to her family, too, if maybe she had a husband and kids and they got sick. But she said no, she was never married. I guess that's true, because Ms. Manigat doesn't look that old. She won't tell me her age, but

she's in her twenties, I think. Ms. Manigat smiled at me, even though her eyes weren't happy.

"My parents were in Miami, and they got it right away," Ms. Manigat said. "Then my sister and nieces came to visit them from Haiti, and they got it, too. I was away working when it happened, and that's why I'm still here."

Ms. Manigat never told me that before.

My family lived in Miami Beach. My dad said our house was too small — I had to share a room with my brother — but my mother liked where we lived because our building was six blocks from the ocean. My mother said the ocean can heal anything. But that can't be true, can it?

My mother wouldn't like it where I am, because there is no ocean and no windows neither. I wondered if Ms. Manigat's parents knew someone who worked on an oil rig, too, but probably not. Probably they got it from my dad and me.

"Ms. Manigat," I said, "Maybe you should move inside like Dr. Ben and everybody else."

"Oh, Jay," Ms. Manigat said, like she was trying to sound cheerful. "Little old man, if I were that scared of anything, why would I be in here teaching you?"

She said she *asked* to be my teacher, which I didn't know. I said I thought her boss was making her do it, and she said she didn't have a boss. No one sent her. She wanted to come.

"Just to meet me?" I asked her.

"Yes, because I saw your face on television, and you looked to me like a one-of-a-kind," she said. She said she was a nurse before, and she used to work with Dr. Ben in his office in Atlanta. She said they worked at the CDC, which is a place that studies diseases. And he knew her, so that was why he let her come teach me.

"A boy like you needs his education. He needs to know how to face life outside," she said.

Ms. Manigat is funny like that. Sometimes she'll quit the regular lesson about presidents and the Ten Commandments and teach me something like how to sew and how to tell plants you eat from plants you don't, and stuff. Like, I remember when she brought a basket with real fruits and vegetables in it, fresh. She said she has a garden where she lives

on the outside, close to here. She said one of the reasons she won't move inside is because she loves her garden so much, and she doesn't want to leave it.

The stuff she brought was not very interesting to look at. She showed me some cassava, which looked like big potatoes to me, and she said it's good to eat, except the roots and leaves are very poisonous. She also brought a fruit called akee, which she said she used to eat from trees in Haiti, and it tasted fine to me, but she said akee can never be eaten before it's opened, or before it's ripe, because it makes your brain swell up and you can die. She also brought different kinds of mushrooms to show me which ones are good or bad, but they all looked alike to me. She promised to bring me other fruits and vegetables to see so I will know what's good for me and what isn't. There's a lot to learn about life outside, she said.

Well, I don't want Ms. Manigat to feel like I am a waste of her time, but I know for a fact I don't have to face life outside. Dr. Ben told me I might be a teenager before I can leave, or even older. He said I might even be a grown man.

But that's okay, I guess. I try not to think about what it would be like to leave. My room, which they moved me to when I had been here six months, is really, really big. They built it especially for me. It's four times as big as the hotel room my mom and dad got for us when we went to Universal Studios in Orlando when I was five. I remember that room because my brother, Kevin, kept asking my dad, "Doesn't this cost too much?" Every time my dad bought us a T-shirt or anything, Kevin brought up how much it cost. I told Kevin to stop it because I was afraid Dad would get mad and stop buying us stuff. Then, when we were in line for the King Kong ride, all by ourselves, Kevin told me, "Dad got fired from his job, stupid. Do you want to go on Welfare?" I waited for Dad and Mom to tell me he got fired, but they didn't. After Kevin said that, I didn't ask them to buy me anything else, and I was scared to stay in that huge, pretty hotel room because I thought we wouldn't have enough money to pay. But we did. And then Dad got a job on the oil rig, and we thought everything would be better.

My room here is as big as half the whole floor I bet. When I run from one side of my room to the other, from the glass in front to the wall in back, I'm out of breath. I like to do that. Sometimes I run until my ribs start

squeezing and my stomach hurts like it's cut open and I have to sit down and rest. There's a basketball net in here, too, and the ball doesn't ever touch the ceiling except if I throw it too high on purpose. I also have comic books, and I draw pictures of me and my family and Ms. Manigat and Dr. Ben. Because I can't watch my videos, now I spend a lot of time writing in this notebook. A whole hour went by already. When I am writing down my thoughts, I forget about everything else.

I have decided for sure to be a doctor someday. I'm going to help make people better.

November 29

Thanksgiving was great! Ms. Manigat cooked real bread and brought me food she'd heated up. I could tell everything except the bread and cassava was from a can, like always, but it tasted much better than my regular food. I haven't had bread in a long time. Because of her mask, Ms. Manigat ate her dinner before she came, but she sat and watched me eat. Rene came in, too, and she surprised me when she gave me a hug. She never does that. Dr. Ben came in for a little while at the end, and he hugged me too, but he said he couldn't stay because he was busy. Dr. Ben doesn't come visit me much anymore. I could see he was growing a beard, and it was almost all white! I've seen Dr. Ben's hair when he's outside of the glass, when he isn't wearing his hot suit, and his hair is brown, not white. I asked him how come his beard was white, and he said that's what happens when your mind is overly tired.

I liked having everybody come to my room. Before, in the beginning, almost nobody came in, not even Ms. Manigat. She used to sit in a chair outside the glass and use the intercom for my lessons. It's better when they come in.

I remember how Thanksgiving used to be, with my family around the table in the dining room, and I told Ms. Manigat about that. Yes, she said, even though she didn't celebrate Thanksgiving in Haiti like Americans do, she remembers sitting at the table with her parents and her sister for Christmas dinner. She said she came to see me today, and Rene and Dr. Ben came too, because we are each other's family now, so we are not alone. I hadn't thought of it like that before.

...

December 1

No one will tell me, not even Ms. M., but I think maybe Dr. Ben is sick. I have not seen him in five whole days. It is quiet here. I wish it was Thanksgiving again.

January 23

I didn't know this before, but you have to be in the right mood to write your thoughts down. A lot happened in the days I missed.

The doctor with the French name is gone now, and I'm glad. He wasn't like Dr. Ben at all. I could hardly believe he was a real doctor, because he always had on the dirtiest clothes when I saw him take off his hot suit outside of the glass. And he was never nice to me — he wouldn't answer at all when I asked him questions, and he wouldn't look in my eyes except for a second. One time he slapped me on my ear, almost for nothing, and his glove hurt so much my ear turned red and was sore for a whole day. He didn't say he was sorry, but I didn't cry. I think he wanted me to.

Oh yeah, and he hooked me up to IV bags and took so much blood from me I couldn't even stand up. I was scared he would operate on me. Ms. Manigat didn't come in for almost a week, and when she finally came, I told her about the doctor taking too much blood. She got really mad. Then I found out the reason she didn't come all those days — he wouldn't let her! She said he tried to bar her from coming. *Bar* is the word she used, which sounds like a prison.

The new doctor and Ms. Manigat do not get along, even though they both speak French. I saw them outside of the glass, yelling back and forth and moving their hands, but I couldn't hear what they were saying. I was afraid he would send Ms. Manigat away for good. But yesterday she told me he's leaving! I told her I was happy, because I was afraid he would take Dr. Ben's place.

No, she told me, there isn't anyone taking Dr. Ben's place. She said the French doctor came here to study me in person because he was one of the doctors Dr. Ben had been sending my blood to ever since I first came. But he was already very sick when he got here, and he started feeling worse, so he had to go. Seeing me was his last wish, Ms. Manigat said, which didn't seem like it could be true because he didn't act like he wanted to be with me.

I asked her if he went back to France to his family, and Ms. Manigat said no, he probably didn't have a family, and even if he did, it's too hard to go to France. The ocean is in the way, she said.

Ms. Manigat seemed tired from all that talking. She said she'd decided to move inside, like Rene, to make sure they were taking care of me properly. She said she misses her garden. The whole place has been falling apart, she said. She said I do a good job of keeping my room clean — and I do, because I have my own mop and bucket and Lysol in my closet — but she told me the hallways are filthy. Which is true, because sometimes I can see water dripping down the wall outside of my glass, a lot of it, and it makes puddles all over the floor. You can tell the water is dirty because you can see different colors floating on top, the way my family's driveway used to look after my dad sprayed it with a hose. He said the oil from the car made the water look that way, but I don't know why it looks that way here. Ms. Manigat said the water smells bad, too.

"It's ridiculous. If they're going to keep you here, they'd damn well better take care of you," Mrs. Manigat said. She must have been really mad, because she never swears.

I told her about the time when Lou came and pressed on my intercom really late at night, when I was asleep and nobody else was around. He was talking really loud like people do in videos when they're drunk. Lou was glaring at me through the glass, banging on it. I had never seen him look so mean. I thought he would try to come into my room but then I remembered he couldn't because he didn't have a hot suit. But I'll never forget how he said, *They should put you to sleep like a dog at the pound.*

I try not to think about that night, because it gave me nightmares. It happened when I was pretty little, like eight. Sometimes I thought maybe I just dreamed it, because the next time Lou came he acted just like normal. He even smiled at me a little bit. Before he stopped coming here, Lou was nice to me every day after that.

Ms. Manigat did not sound surprised when I told her what Lou said about putting me to sleep. "Yes, Jay," she told me, "For a long time, there have been people outside who didn't think we should be taking care of you."

I never knew that before!

I remember a long time ago, when I was really little and I had

pneumonia, my mom was scared to leave me alone at the hospital. "They won't know how to take care of Jay there," she said to my dad, even though she didn't know I heard her. I had to stay by myself all night, and because of what my mom said, I couldn't go to sleep. I was afraid everyone at the hospital would forget I was there. Or maybe something bad would happen to me.

It seems like the lights go off every other day now. And I know people must really miss Lou, because the dirty gray water is all over the floor outside my glass and there's no one to clean it up.

February 14

6-4-6-7-2-9-4-3 6-4-6-7-2-9-4-3 6-4-6-7-2-9-4-3

I remember the numbers already! I have been saying them over and over in my head so I won't forget, but I wanted to write them down in the exact right order to be extra sure. I want to know them without even looking.

Oh, I should start at the beginning. Yesterday, no one brought me any dinner, not even Ms. Manigat. She came with a huge bowl of oatmeal this morning, saying she was very sorry. She said she had to look a long time to find that food, and it wore her out. The oatmeal wasn't even hot, but I didn't say anything. I just ate. She watched me eating.

She didn't stay with me long, because she doesn't teach me lessons anymore. After the French doctor left, we talked about the Emancipation Proclamation and Martin Luther King, but she didn't bring that up today. She just kept sighing, and she said she had been in bed all day yesterday because she was so tired, and she was sorry she forgot to feed me. She said I couldn't count on Rene to bring me food because she didn't know where Rene was. It was hard for me to hear her talk through her hot suit today. Her mask was crooked, so the microphone wasn't in front of her mouth where it should be.

She saw my notebook and asked if she could look at it. I said sure. She looked at the pages from the beginning. She said she liked the part where I said she was my best friend. Her face-mask was fogging up, so I couldn't see her eyes and I couldn't tell if she was smiling. I am very sure she did not put her suit on right today.

When she put my notebook down, she told me to pay close attention

to her and repeat the numbers she told me, which were 6-4-6-7-2-9-4-3.

I asked her what they were. She said it was the security code for my door. She said she wanted to give the code to me because my buzzer wasn't working, and I might need to leave my room if she overslept and nobody came to bring me food. She told me I could use the same code on the elevator, and the kitchen was on the third floor. There wouldn't be anybody there, she said, but I could look on the shelves, the top ones up high, to see if there was any food. If not, she said I should take the stairs down to the first floor and find the red EXIT sign to go outside. She said the elevator doesn't go to the first floor anymore.

I felt scared then, but she put her hand on top of my head again just like usual. She said she was sure there was plenty of food outside.

"But am I allowed?" I asked her. "What if people get sick?"

"You worry so much, little man," she said. "Only you matter now, my little one-of-a-kind."

But see I'm sure Ms. Manigat doesn't really want me to go outside. I've been thinking about that over and over. Ms. Manigat must be very tired to tell me to do something like that. Maybe she has a fever and that's why she told me how to get out of my room. My brother said silly things when he had a fever, and my father too. My father kept calling me *Oscar*, and I didn't know who Oscar was. My dad told us he had a brother who died when he was little, and maybe his name was Oscar. My mother didn't say anything at all when she got sick. She just died very fast. I wish I could find Ms. Manigat and give her something to drink. You get very thirsty when you have a fever, which I know for a fact. But I can't go to her because I don't know where she is. And besides, I don't know where Dr. Ben keeps the hot suits. What if I went to her and she wasn't wearing hers?

Maybe the oatmeal was the only thing left in the kitchen, and now I ate it all. I hope not! But I'm thinking maybe it is because I know Ms. Manigat would have brought me more food if she could have found it. She's always asking me if I have enough to eat. I'm already hungry again.

6-4-6-7-2-9-4-3

6-4-6-7-2-9-4-3

February 15

I am writing in the dark. The lights are off. I tried to open my lock but

the numbers don't work because of the lights being off. I don't know where Ms. Manigat is. I'm trying not to cry.

What if the lights never come back on?

February 16

There's so much I want to say but I have a headache from being hungry. When the lights came back on I went out into the hall like Ms. M told me and I used the numbers to get the elevator to work and then I went to the kitchen like she said. I wanted to go real fast and find some peanut butter or some Oreos or even a can of beans I could open with the can opener Ms. M left me at Thanksgiving.

There's no food in the kitchen! There's empty cans and wrappers on the floor and even roaches but I looked on every single shelf and in every cabinet and I couldn't find anything to eat.

The sun was shining really REALLY bright from the window. I almost forgot how the sun looks. When I went to the window I saw a big, empty parking lot outside. At first I thought there were diamonds all over the ground because of the sparkles but it was just a lot of broken glass. I could only see one car and I thought it was Ms. M's. But Ms. M would never leave her car looking like that. For one thing it had two flat tires!

Anyway I don't think there's anybody here today. So I thought of a plan. I have to go now.

Ms. M, this is for you — or whoever comes looking for me. I know somebody will find this notebook if I leave it on my bed. I'm very sorry I had to leave in such a hurry.

I didn't want to go outside but isn't it okay if it's an emergency? I am really really hungry. I'll just find some food and bring it with me and I'll come right back. I'm leaving my door open so I won't get locked out. Ms. M, maybe I'll find your garden with cassavas and akee like you showed me and I'll know the good parts from the bad parts. If someone sees me and I get in trouble I'll just say I didn't have anything to eat.

Whoever is reading this don't worry. I'll tell everybody I see please please not to get too close to me. I know Dr. Ben was very worried I might make somebody sick.





BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

CHARLES DE LINT

Riding the Bullet, by Stephen King, Scribner/Philtrum Press, 2000, \$2.50.

WELL, Stephen King's at it again, stretching the boundaries in a way that few other established authors do. He seems fearless in getting his stories out to his readers in as many different ways as possible: from releasing multiple books in the same year (unthinkable for most major writers) and bringing the serial novel back into the limelight (*The Green Mile*, 1996), to his last collection only being available in an audio format (*Blood and Smoke*, 2000) and this e-book-only publication of his latest novella.

"*Riding the Bullet*" continues in the vein of King's more recent forays into mixing mainstream and the supernatural — as opposed to his over-the-top horror in books like *Desperation* (1996) or the surrealism to be found in *The Dark Tower*

series. It's the story of Alan Parker, hitchhiking home from college to see his mother who's in the hospital following a stroke. Along the way, one of his rides is with an Angel of Death, and nothing will ever be the same for him again.

It's a terrific story, highlighting King's gift for characterization and his sheer narrative drive.

Was it hard to stay engaged, reading it on a small handheld screen as I did?

Not in the least. After downloading it, I meant to only read a few "pages" and ended up devouring the whole story in one sitting. I've come to realize — after years of reading books in the form of uncorrected bound and loose galleys, in manuscript (when the publisher hasn't got a galley ready yet), as traditional books, and now as e-books or as ASCII text documents on a handheld device — that in the end, it's the words that matter, not how I read them. I wouldn't want to give up books. There's still

something irreplaceable about curling up in a big chair, late at night, with some fat volume on your lap. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't explore other formats.

With "Riding the Bullet," I downloaded it from a place called peanutpress.com <www.peanutpress.com> who provide books for the OS Palm and Windows CE operating systems. You need a copy of their software reader, but it comes free with every purchase. (Incidentally they also have King's last three novels available for both those operating systems.) "Riding the Bullet" is available as well in a number of other electronic formats. See the Scribner's Website <www.simonandschuster.com/> for more details.

Now, naturally King isn't the first to offer up original material in digital form. There are any number of other new as well as reprinted novels and short stories available on the Net as I write this, and more coming every day. A couple of recent favorites worth mentioning are the original story "Red Rock" by Terri Windling <www.endicott-studio.com/forrr.html>, Peter Crowther's "Front-Page McGuffin and the Greatest Story Never Told" <www.horror.net/crowfrontpage.htm> which originally appeared in *Black Cats* and

Broken Mirrors (1998), and Parke Godwin's most recent short story collection, *The Night You Could Hear Forever* <www.dreams-unlimited.com>.

The difference between King and Windling, Crowther, Godwin, and the many other fine authors who are experimenting with this form of publication, is that King, being the self-proclaimed Brand Name that he is, already has an enormous readership actively seeking out his work, no matter how it's being offered to them. He's probably one of the few authors who, at this point in his career, could self-publish and hardly lose any sales. For other, less-well-known writers, it's still a struggle to let readers know that their work exists on the Net (never mind in the bookstore), and therein lies the problem. How to sift through it all to find the gold among the chaff?

I don't have any easy answer. For now, it's a matter of relying on word-of-mouth. When you find a great story on the Net, tell your friends about it. But the good thing about "Riding the Bullet" (besides its being a fine story in its own right) is that, hopefully, it will raise the general public's awareness of this medium and get them out there seeking more books and stories.

Miracle and Other Christmas Stories, by Connie Willis, Bantam Spectra, 1999, \$19.95.

When this book arrived for review, I bemoaned the fact that I wouldn't be able to cover it. You see, it got to me in late December when I'm writing my May column (yes, there's that much of a time-lag). But when I mentioned this to my esteemed editor, he simply said, "If they're good stories, it doesn't matter when you read them." Which is why I seem to be writing about Christmas in August.

Actually, it's early March when I finally get to the book, and while there's snow still on the ground (in Ottawa, some years there's still snow in May), Christmas is long gone except for the bills many of us are still paying. But my editor was right. It doesn't matter because, seasonal or not, these are wonderful stories.

From the sheer old-fashioned delight of the opening story, "Miracle," which explains why *Miracle on 34th Street* is a better movie than *It's A Wonderful Life*, in a manner that's reminiscent (but not derivative) of the film, through to three modern wise-persons following a star into the west in the closing piece, "Epiphany," Willis is at top form. Believable characters,

moving and/or amusing stories, and that wonderfully patented clean prose that is always the mark of Willis's writing.

It's not all sweetness and light either. For every "Newsletter," an amusing *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* take on those dreaded Christmas newsletters we all receive, there's a darker tale of just desserts as in what happens to the unpleasant protagonist of "In Coppelius's Toyshop."

The bottom line is, Connie Willis invariably delivers a good story and she does it eight times here. (And yes, there are only eight stories in the book.)

Wait a few months and I'm sure the paperback edition will be available, just in time for you to give out as Christmas presents to the discerning readers on your list. But don't let that stop you from reading it yourself...at any time of the year.

Anonymous Rex, by Eric Garcia, Villard, 2000, \$23.

The private eye novel has long been blended with both sf and fantasy, ranging from Bester's telepathic investigator and Asimov's robot detective to Glen Cook's humorous fantasies and numerous vampire detectives, so Eric Garcia's

debut featuring a dinosaur disguised as a human PI won't strike most of us in the field as terribly innovative. However, this is coming from a mainstream press and the mainstream critics already seem fascinated with "an incredible idea — brilliantly executed."

How does it fare from our more informed viewpoint?

Let me get the bad part over with first. Garcia postulates that dinosaurs never went extinct. Instead, they went into hiding, living among us, unnoticed because of their lifelike latex disguises.

I'm always willing to suspend my disbelief to give an author a chance, but I just couldn't buy the disguise bit. Not when they take off the disguises to free fiercesome jaws, clawed appendages and those enormous tails. There weren't lumps under the smooth lines of that latex? People who interact with them can't tell? Every time the protagonist took off his costume and whipped free his tail, I was jolted out of the book, thinking, "Wait a minute now...."

But if you can get past that — think of it in metaphorical terms, I suppose, rather than literal — the novel's a lot of fun.

Vincent Rubio is one of the dinos, a raptor PI in L.A. with a bad

herb addiction (basil and the like do for dinos what alcohol does for humans). He has recently lost his partner, is losing his business, and is basically about to hit the bottom. But in the tried-and-true style of all those hard-boiled PI novels that have gone before, from Chandler through to Robert Parker, a last case jolts him out of his addiction and into a conspiracy that will affect dinos everywhere.

The prose is good, the concepts (beyond the costumed disguises) well-thought-out and fun, and best of all, the dino aspect of the plot is integral to how it all works out, rather than an exotic add-on to give a tired story a bit of a facelift. It all makes for a diverting evening's read.

According to the cover copy, Garcia's already working on a second book featuring Rubio, so it looks to be the start of a series. But if you're thinking of trying it, wait for the paperback. While it's certainly a fun read, it's not so great that you need a hardcover copy on your library shelf.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2. ☞



BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

The Fourth World, by Dennis Danvers, Avon Eos, 2000, \$23.

The Memory of Fire, by George Foy, Bantam Spectra, 2000, \$13.95.

IN A recent essay in *The New York Times Book Review* on the late New York writer/artist/photographer David Wojnarowicz, Vince Passaro writes wistfully of a bygone day, not so many years ago, when American literature was "adamant about its status as opposition — an opposition that, if it was not always political, was at least unmistakably spiritual." He's referring to the work of such writers as Norman Mailer, Flannery O'Connor, and Ralph Ellison, but his description of this salient feature of twentieth-century American literature sounds an awful lot like what draws me to science fiction. "There are very few writers [today]," says Passaro, "who perceive their world and its organi-

zation and manners as intractably absurd, or lethal, or avaricious, or false — few even who can perceive the organization as contingent rather than as immutable natural fact."

Perceiving the world — our particular world, as it is now — as "contingent," a product of historical accident, merely one of millions or billions of possibilities: that's sf at its heart, imagining alternative worlds future, past, or parallel. And yet the change that Passaro notes outside the genre, a steady creeping advance of blinkered middle-class perspectives disinclined to question the basic tenets of the world, casts its shadow over sf also. "[T]he time of the American writer straightforwardly in opposition is over or nearly so," Passaro says, and when we compare the work of today's sf writers to that of Philip K. Dick, Joanna Russ, Barry N. Malzberg, Thomas M. Disch, and dozens of others from the 1960s and early 1970s, it's hard to escape the conclusion

that he's speaking for our genre as well.

And it's not as though our world circa A.D. 2000 has less need of artistic opposition than it used to. The United States may be experiencing an unprecedented period of economic prosperity, but the gap between rich and poor in this country continues to widen; the gap between the rich of our nation and the poor of other nations has become so vast as to defy description. Meanwhile the human population has passed the six billion mark. Dozens of species of plant and animal go extinct every day. And the U.S. can (proudly?) claim twenty-five percent of the entire world's prison population — nearly one percent of the adult U.S. population is in jail.

There's no shortage of social and economic ailments, so it's a good thing that sf still produces some work that adopts the position of opposition. Exhibit A: Dennis Danvers's latest novel, *The Fourth World*, which shows us a future only a decade or two away, in which most citizens of the U.S. spend their time immersed in a full-sensory virtual Web while multinational megacorporations scheme to exploit the poorer populations of the Third World.

Danvers focuses on one such plot, involving a Mars colony, a nanotechnological Web interface, and the native Indian population of the Mexican province of Chiapas, who are still waging their rebellion against a Mexican government supported and directed by the U.S. In the middle of the action are a handful of generally well-drawn characters: Santee St. John, a disillusioned Web journalist out to help the Chiapanecos; Margaret Mayfield, an American activist, St. John's fellow crusader; Webster Webfoot, a low-key teenage rebel bored by the vapidness of virtual life; Webster's sometime girlfriend Starr, a satellite tech with dreams of joining the Mars mission; and expatriate Americans Zach and Edie Hayman, who run a tourist *ranchero* near the war zone.

What Danvers doesn't give us is any major Mexican character — we meet several locals, but they remain almost entirely invisible. Only one female Chiapaneco rebel (who's involved in an affair with Zach) and another young woman from the area (who meets Webster on a bus) have any significant roles to play, and we never view events through their eyes. The Mexico Danvers shows us never attains the vivid reality of Lucius Shepard's

Central American settings, and his depiction of an ultra-wired future never approaches the fine detail and conceptual innovation in the best work of William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, or Pat Cadigan. For the most part Danvers constructs his future out of standard cyberpunk parts: full-immersion VR environments, the online re-creation of famous personalities, international mega-corporations using the Web to nefarious ends, a vast artificial intelligence coming of age.

In fact, the best parts of *The Fourth World* could exist — and perhaps more comfortably — in an entirely non-sf context. The sf overlay doesn't add anything to the story or the real-world issue at its heart; in some ways, the sf actually makes the story and the issue less compelling, less tangible. The evil plan of the megacorps absolutely requires the sf concepts of a Mars colony and an all-pervasive virtual Web, but the scheme's sheer grandiosity cannot compete with the gut-wrenching everyday cruelties taking place in Chiapas and other parts of Mexico today. The images of life (and death) on the U.S.-Mexico border collected in Charles Bowden's *Juarez: The Laboratory of Our Future* (which I have not seen, have only read descriptions of, and that is enough to

chill the soul) make the plans of *The Fourth World's* megacorps look like a humanitarian relief effort.

What success *The Fourth World* achieves comes through its characters and their encounters. In the dissolute Zach, Danvers gives us a man real enough in his cowardice for us to cheer on when he finally decides to act. The relationship between Zach and Edie, all affection seemingly leached away by years of disappointment and inertia, possesses an exquisite verisimilitude that reaches epiphany when the relationship shifts, revealing the smoldering ember of love abiding under the ashes. Even the larger issue — the despicable nature of our country's involvement in places like Mexico — emerges most tangibly in the interactions of Danvers's characters. "You pretend to work, you pretend to live in a real place," the young Mexican woman tells Webster. "But it's all pretending.... I don't pretend to work. I have no choice." And that's as close as *The Fourth World* comes to touching the heart of the matter, the huge gap between the life of even a poor Texan like Webster and that of a Mexican peasant.

I approached *The Fourth World* most sympathetically — I wanted to find some contemporary sf taking

on the ills of the world despite the prevailing complacency of our times. Danvers's book does that, but it only touches the surface. For the most part, Danvers offers a simplistic binary reading of the problem: modern civilization is bad, too dependent on technology, removed from the tactility of the real world; the hardscrabble life of subsistence farmers like those in Chiapas is good, despite (or even because of) the necessary work alluded to by Webster's lady friend. In the end Santee and Margaret hurl their laptop computers into the jungle, gaily anticipating "the collapse of modern civilization."

The problem with this simple anti-tech romanticism — tear it all down and return to the bliss of Eden — is that it quickly reduces itself to the absurd. Zach and Edie wax nostalgic as they work their old car back into driving shape, complaining about the computerized roads and automated cars that have taken the fun out of driving. "It's all smart, high-tech shit now. Hurry, hurry, hurry. Faster, faster, faster. I hate that shit." So is that the answer — turn the clock back to a time when you could ride the open road — say, 1960? Hardly. And a writer of that time might have seen all the cars and the new interstate highway

system as the evil encroaching tech, and harked back to the days of horseback. So it would go, generation by generation, lamenting invention after invention, back to the beginnings of agriculture, or the ability to make fire. Throw it all out? That's obviously not the solution.

And of course we can't turn the clock back anyway. We can't restore the past — we can only invent the future. The real question — perhaps the most pressing question facing our civilization today — is how to create a world that combines the benefits of a high-tech culture with the best parts of our low-tech heritage. A deeper exploration of these issues in a book like *The Fourth World* might have helped show us the way.

In *The Memory of Fire*, George Foy offers somewhat more in the way of envisioning an alternative, though it's far from fully developed. His near future has seen most of today's identifiable trends continue and intensify, and the power of corporations and their pressure to conform has (among other things) resulted in the creation of semi-autonomous zones called *cruces* in Latin America, nodes in the U.S., where an economy of barter and smuggling supports populations of

artists and other misfits who reject the regimented life of the cities. It's early days yet for these nodes, though — there aren't many, and their existence alongside the larger culture requires a delicate balance.

In fact, the story we follow begins with the destruction of the *cruce* of Bamaca in South America and the narrow escape of one woman, Soledad MacRae, a talented musician who had but recently taken to the *cruce* to escape her suffocating life as a teacher at the city's Conservatory. We find her now in San Francisco, having fled north seeking refuge in the American node located there. Soledad is haunted by dreams of the final days in Bamaca, and memories of her happy time there with the revolutionary poet and philosopher Jorge Echeverria, and through them we learn how she came to the *cruce*, how her affair with Jorge began, how she overcame her stage fright there among the myriad street musicians, and how disaster struck this haven of freedom and creativity. But there's something more to Soledad and her dreams, and the people of the Bay Area node suspect it might bode ill for their own enclave.

Though *The Memory of Fire* is set no further in the future than *The Fourth World*, Foy gives us a much richer impression of futurity,

not in fancier technology but in cultural detail. The nodes have been founded along the lines of "Hawkeyite" theory, and we hear of other social and political strains, Kropotkinites and Adornistas and Ludd-Kaczynski cells. Most of these receive little development beyond their names, but the views of Hawkey and his followers emerge in more detail. Foy also gives us poems by Jorge, descriptions of Soledad's music, and many colorful views of life in the Bamaca *cruce* and the Bay Area node. The impression of a different world, grown out of our own, gives *The Memory of Fire* a more intriguing surface than we find in *The Fourth World*.

Still, like Danvers, Foy depends a bit too heavily on those who have gone before him, particularly for his depiction of the Bay Area node. The debt to Gibson is almost embarrassingly large: Piles of junked cars and old computer equipment, a postmodern melange of retro-chic and digital tech, a tinkerer who builds bizarre robotic creatures out of scrap. Foy's node is the lesser cousin of Gibson's Bay Bridge enclave (visited most recently in *All Tomorrow's Parties*), with "hundreds of tiny workshops making ... Wildnet encryption programs, Shift-shin recordings, hydroponic kohlrabi" and a market selling "jisi

yomo, high-amp tazers, jagger triage, copied Clam Fetish spindles." There's nothing new in it, and Gibson's got a better ear for the rhythms of street culture.

At first it seems that Foy will play things as simplistically as Danvers does, setting up a strictly black-and-white opposition between the positive vibe of the *cruce* and the negative hum of the city. "[I]n contrast to the dark stone and black shadows of the Walled City, everything in and between the different cardinal points from which music comes here throbs with the enthusiastic frequencies of color." In the *cruce* there is life, in the city there is nothing.

Fortunately, as we relive more of Soledad's memories with her, we discover a welcome complexity in the *cruce*. It's no paradise — lovers quarrel, wives are abandoned by husbands, children go hungry. And the discussions of Hawkleyite theory — brief and cryptic enough to avoid becoming lectures — suggest a thought-provoking framework in which small communities (no larger than 10,000 people) can resist the tendency toward bureaucracy while still providing a lively enough venue for economic viability. *The Memory of Fire* is no manifesto, but it does toss out some ideas worth mulling over in the

search for a better future.

And as the novel progresses, Foy introduces a welcome element of ambiguity, as his characters argue over their principles. Is the Hawkleyite concept a vital wisdom or an adolescent fantasy? Might it be both? Foy captures the difficulty of resolving idealism and pragmatism, of retaining grand dreams in the face of life experience, and he leaves it for the reader to expand upon the ideas his characters allude to obliquely.

The Memory of Fire offers a more satisfying examination of the problems that will face us in the next ten or twenty years, but still it shares with *The Fourth World* a disappointing shallowness of imagination. Foy's future may be more complicated than Danvers's, but his viewpoint remains locked into a late-20th-century American middle class rut. We see everything through the eyes of characters who don't appear to work for their livings — Soledad comes to the Bamaca *cruce* with city money that carries her for a long time, Jorge seems free to roam and rant at any hour of the day or night, and the Bay Area folk have top-of-the-line computer equipment, but the only time we see one of the main Bay Area characters trying to earn anything, it's by putting on a mechanized perfor-

mance art piece for rich folk from the city — hardly the model we'd expect for the economic survival of the node. References are made to barter, but we never see it in action.

The laborers — the folks who do the smuggling in Bamaca, or the ones who create the "Wildnet 3-D games" in the Bay Area node's workshops — remain nearly unseen, as if to suggest that, for all the interesting talk, it's really not possible to imagine a vibrant life that involves working for a living.

It may be a trifle unfair to criticize Foy and Danvers for failing to show us a more convincing

picture of life in the lower echelons of their future worlds — these are novels, not sociology texts, and they need some unusual people and events to keep their stories moving — but it would be refreshing to encounter an sf novel with a more thoroughly oppositional stance, a more complete outsider perspective, to offer a stronger antidote to the complacency that threatens to engulf us. ¶

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"For God's sake, Fred, at least try to look busy."

Jerry Olton's most recent books include two Star Trek novels, Where Sea Meets Sky, and New Earth: The Flaming Arrow, the latter of which he wrote in collaboration with his wife Kathy. Word has it that Jerry's next book, an expansion of his celebrated novella "Abandon in Place," is due out towards the end of this year.

There's a theory of group dynamics that says that in any group of five people, one of them invariably becomes the eccentric. Jerry Olton independently came upon a similar observation recently: no matter where you go, someone always takes the role of...

The Pain in the Ass

By Jerry Olton

IT WAS ANNIE'S TURN TO be the Pain in the Ass. She was new to the family and we weren't sure if she'd be much good at it, so we were all prepared to be extra supportive, but none of us guessed the lengths she would go to in order to succeed. I mean, we'd have cared for her if she'd gotten sick, and we'd probably even have put up with insanity, but *dying*? That's above and beyond the call.

We didn't know she was dead right away. She had spread herself over Edgar's shoulders and down around his chest and back the way she sometimes does when she's sleepy, and her heat exchanger was sticking out in front of his face while he was trying to watch the vid, so he thought she was on the job. He didn't even notice that something was wrong when she started to stiffen up, 'cause he figured that was part of her plan, too. She did that to him once before, right after she'd joined the family and everyone wanted to see what a Morph could do.

It was kind of creepy. In her normal state she looks like a great big banana slug, so we had her on the kitchen table so we wouldn't have to

bend down to talk to her. She told Edgar to come stand next to the table, and when he did she slithered over to him and then just sort of squooshed around his body and flowed up over his chest and around his back until she covered him from neck to waist. He said it tickled, but it looked gooey to me, and I said so. That's when she hardened up. Her face was right under his, like the second head down on a totem pole, and she said, "No, check it out," and went all hard.

I didn't want to touch her, but I was the designated Goody as well as the Little Girl that day so I had to do what I was told. I rapped a knuckle on her and was relieved when she went "thunk," but I still didn't want her crawling on me. I didn't let her do it until a couple weeks later when we were outside looking at the stars. She was showing us where she came from, and I was getting cold out there in the back yard without my jacket, so she flattened out and made a blanket for me. Mom draped her over my shoulders (David was the Mom that night) and she kind of cinched up around me so the cold air couldn't get in, and it felt pretty good. Not gooey like I'd expected.

Annie tried hard to fit in, even though she was so different. It wasn't like she had much choice. Everyone in America had to belong to a standard family; that was the law even for aliens. Maybe especially for aliens. Ilsa says the Family Values Laws were passed because of all the immigrants that came into the country with their funny ways of doing things. The government figured the best way to keep America American was to teach everybody what it meant to grow up in a wholesome, nuclear family.

I don't know about wholesome, but ours certainly goes nuclear often enough. There's Edgar and Ilsa and David and me: two adults, a twelve-year-old boy (only never call him "boy" unless he's the designated Goody) and a nine-year-old girl. I don't mind "girl"; it's better than some of the things Edgar calls me when he's being the Pain. You'd think a forty-year-old man would outgrow some of that stuff, but he seems to take a perverse delight in it when it's his turn. And Ilsa — when she's both the Pain and the Little Girl at the same time, watch out. I don't throw tantrums for ice cream all the time; why should she?

I don't know why the government thinks four people sharing roles is the ideal family, but they do, except we have to hire in a "Point Four" every few weeks. We did until we got Annie, anyway. Then we could hire

out our extra time. I like hiring out as the Know-it-all. I can go into someone else's house and tell them all the things they're doing wrong, and they have to be polite and listen even though they want to strangle me. I guess the fact that I'm still alive is proof that the nuclear family does sort of work okay after all.

The night Annie died, I wasn't so sure. I was the Mom that day, David was the Little Boy (which gave me a chance to say "Hey, act your age" whenever he'd forget) Ilsa was the Dad, and Edgar was the Little Girl. It was a fun combination, except like I said, Annie was the Pain and she hadn't done it before, so we were all a little nervous.

Then Edgar got up to go pee and discovered that Annie was all stiff and wouldn't get off.

"Hey, I have to use the bathroom," he said, but she didn't budge. "Annie, get off," he said, and he whacked her on the side, but she just went "bonk" and stayed put.

"Mommm, make her get off," he whined.

I had decided to make a cherry pie and was regretting that I'd bought unpitted cherries, so I wasn't as supportive and nurturing as the Mom is supposed to be. I was sitting on the couch next to him with a bowl on my lap and a paring knife in my hand, hands gooey up to the wrists, so I just said, "Jesus, Edgar, chill. Annie, let him leak." And for good measure I said, "Ilsa, help me with these damned cherries."

She was reading the newspaper, she just grunted and scratched her butt.

David piped up. "Just because you're Mom today doesn't mean you can swear."

"Does too," I told him. "I can do anything I want."

Edgar rapped Annie again. "Hey, I'm not kidding here. I've got to go. Get off." He reached up to her top edge and tried to peel her from around his neck.

"Annie," I said, "let him go."

She still didn't do anything, so I said, "Hey, listen up. We don't do bathroom humor in this family."

Still nothing. I tried to look her in the eyes, and that's when I realized all three of them were closed.

"She fell asleep!" I said. "Hah, good one, Annie!"

Edgar pinched her on the flank, but that didn't wake her up. Neither did tweaking her nose.

"Annie?" he said. He looked down, his chin touching her forehead. "Annie?"

THE ALIEN RELATIONS bureau was closed for the day. We tried looking for information on the web, but when we searched on "Morpheus physiology" we got 97,368 hits, half of which said "XXX Live Alien Sex Acts On Your Screen!!!" and stuff like that. Booooring. Edgar and David wanted to look, but I told them no.

Annie wasn't responding at all. Near as I could tell she wasn't even breathing, but she didn't need to when she was all stretched out like she was on Edgar, so that didn't really mean much.

He was getting kind of frantic. I mean, being trapped inside an alien was bad enough, but she had flowed down way below his waist before she'd hardened, and he really did have to go. He finally said, "I think we'd better go to the emergency room."

That's when I knew we were in trouble. We didn't go to the emergency room the time David tripped on the couch and broke his toe, and we didn't go when Ilsa stabbed herself in the hand coring an apple, either. If Edgar wanted to go now, then this was worse than that.

"What about the money?" I asked. It was my job to be practical. We had insurance, but the deductible was way more than my allowance.

"Screw the money," he said. "There's something wrong."

"Don't say 'screw' when you're one of the children, dear," said Ilsa. "But I think you're right. We'd better check this out."

"Okay," I said. "I'll get the car."

"No, let me!" said David.

"All right, you do it," I told him. I never understood why he thought driving was such a big deal. All you did was tell the car where to go; it wasn't like you could actually crash it or anything. I mean, where's the adventure in that? But he got all excited and ran for the garage, so I went into the kitchen and stuck the bowl of cut-up cherries into the fridge, then we all trooped after him.

He wanted to turn on the siren and lights, but Ilsa wouldn't let him.

It costs more to do that, and it wasn't like it would get us there any faster. Rush hour was way past, so we didn't need top priority at every light.

Once we got there we realized that transit time was only part of the equation anyway. The emergency room was full of people, and everybody had these little white tickets with numbers on them. There must have been sixty or seventy people in there, and the place was maybe twenty feet square. There were only a dozen chairs, so most of us had to stand shoulder to shoulder in the middle of the room.

It was painted in fast-food colors, like somebody had stuck a bomb in a barrel of mustard and then touched up the corners with ketchup afterward. There wasn't a receptionist, just a door in the wall opposite the entrance, and a sign above the door that said, "Now serving number 46." I looked around for the ticket machine and saw it beside the door we'd come in, but when I tried to get it to spit out a number for us the machine wouldn't let me have one until we'd entered our insurance stuff and paid the deductible. Ilsa had to do that; she was the only adult with a credit card in our family that night.

We got ticket number 98. Ilsa gave it to me to hold, but David snatched it from my hand and stuck out his tongue at me. I said, "Hey, give that back," but he didn't, and I didn't push it. Part of being the Mom is knowing what matters and what doesn't.

I thought it was going to be a long wait, but the "Now serving" sign blinked to 47, and then to 48 just a minute or so later.

Edgar was crossing his legs and hopping up and down by now, and whenever he remembered his family role he'd say in a loud voice, "I gotta pee!" It wasn't much of a stretch for him to be the Little Girl at that point.

David was squished in next to the wall. I tried to keep an eye on him, but it's not easy being responsible when you're short. It seemed like I'd just turned away when I heard him say, "Oops."

Edgar said, "What?"

"Nothing," he said, which is twelve-year-old for "Oh shit."

Edgar looked over his shoulder — bending at the knees since the rest of him was stiff as a tree now — and said, "You dummy, that's a double or nothing machine! It just docked us for twice the deductible."

"It's not my fault," David said, but I peeked between him and Edgar and saw our ticket sticking out of the slot. It had "Double" stamped on it

in bold red ink. "What, did it just jump in there on its own?" I asked. "I didn't know they could do that."

"Damn it," Edgar said to David, "Why can't you keep your hands off stuff you don't understand?"

"You must be the Pain today," said an old woman who was standing next to David. She scowled at him, but with her it didn't look like she was playing a role.

"He's a pain every day," Edgar said, and it sounded like he meant it even more than his Little Girl character would account for.

"We're up to 75," Ilisa said hopefully.

"Quick," said Edgar, "Let's try double or nothing again. Maybe we can at least get it back down to the original deductible."

"Bad idea," I said, but Ilisa and Edgar exchanged that glance that adults do when they're going to take over the family, and Edgar stuck the ticket back into the machine. I wanted to protest, but Ilisa was the Dad, and even though I was the Mom, it's bad form to argue in public so I let them do it.

The machine beeped and flashed a hand of poker cards on the screen. Two twos, a three, a five, and a six.

"Go for the straight," David told him, but Ilisa said, "That's a sucker bet."

"Chuck the three, five, and six," I said. "Maybe you'll get two pair."

We were doomed already, but that was the only thing we could do, so he did it. Sure enough, we got a seven, a jack, and a queen. The machine showed its hand: a full house, kings and aces. It stamped our ticket "Double" again and spit it out.

"The machine's rigged," Edgar said indignantly, snatching the ticket out of the slot.

"Well of course it's rigged, dummy," I told him. "This is a health care clinic." That wasn't the way to speak to a Little Girl, but he had already blown his role, so I didn't care.

"I gotta pee!" he said again, maybe to reestablish his character or maybe because he was really uncomfortable now.

The people around us were inching forward, and more people were coming in behind us, so we cut our losses and joined the throng. When we got to the door, a snotty sign claimed it would only admit one family

member with the patient, but we all crowded through anyway. We were paying for four; we might as well get our money's worth.

There was a conveyor belt just inside, like the luggage thing at the spaceport. It took Edgar by surprise, and since Annie had him all bound up he nearly fell over again, but Ilsa got a shoulder under his arm and kept him upright until he caught his balance. David and I hung on as well, and the five of us chugged on down this long, wide corridor toward the doctor.

We couldn't see him immediately, of course. First we had to run the gauntlet of receptionists, nurses, and physicians' assistants, each of whom asked the same questions. The conveyor didn't stop, though, so Edgar had to talk really fast, like, "Yes I'm insured no it's not a pre-existing condition yes I waive my right to sue for malpractice the problem is I've got this alien..." but by then it was too late 'cause the conveyor kept going.

We finally saw the doctor up ahead, wearing the traditional golf outfit and lobbing a bottle of pills at a patient who had already drifted past. There was another patient between us and him: the woman who had spoken to us out in the waiting room. She didn't wait for the doctor to ask what her problem was. As soon as she got within earshot, she said, "Migrane headache again, I tried cold, tried sitting in the dark, tried aspirin, tried codeine. I need Demerol!" She was an old hand at this, by the sound of it.

The doctor nodded sagely as the conveyor carried her closer. "Certainly, my dear," he said, "only now I can give you *Synthedem*! It's almost as good and only nine-tenths the cost."

"No, dammit, I want my regular drugs!" she said, but the doctor was already keying the prescription into the refrigerator-sized Pharmall Vendomatic beside him. The pills popped out of the hopper just as the woman slid past, and she scooped them up and said disgustedly, "I'll be back with a butcher knife if these don't work!"

"They'll work," the doctor reassured her, then he turned to Edgar and said, "Now what can I do for — good God!"

"It's a Morpheus," Edgar said. "I can't get her to move."

"Get it out of here!" the doctor said, backing away.

"Why?" asked Edgar.

"Because if I get caught providing medicine to aliens, I'll lose my license!"

"Really?" said Edgar, and he stepped off the conveyor belt. There was

a little wall that was supposed to separate the patient from the doctor, but it wasn't high enough to stop Edgar.

The doctor said, "Hey, you can't do that!" but the rest of us climbed over the wall and surrounded him before he could run away.

"I'm the patient," Edgar said. "Annie's the condition."

The doctor took a quick glance at her, then looked away. "She's dead."

I felt my heart kind of skip a little. If I'd been myself that night I think I would have cried, but I was the Mom, so I just bit my lip and didn't say anything.

Edgar was totally out of character by now. Having to pee can make you do that. He just said, "I see. Then I'd like to have her removed."

The doctor shook his head. "Sorry, that's a surgical procedure. We don't do surgery at this clinic."

The patient behind us, a tall guy with a big wart on his nose, said "Aw shit" when he heard that, and rolled on past.

The next one, a teenage girl with a big pink wad of gum in her hair, stepped off the belt behind me and said, "Hey, it's my turn!"

"They won't do surgery," David told her.

"That sucks."

"You need a hairdresser anyway," he said.

"I'm not here for that. I'm supposed to be a senile old fart," she said.

"Oh. In that case, you've come to the right place."

The next patient climbed off the conveyor, too. He really *was* a senile old fart, complete with cane. "My prostate's the size of a watermelon!" he said.

"Prostate," said the doctor. "Prostate."

"No, I'm from Iowa," said the fart. Then a little switch seemed to flip over in his head and he raised his cane over his head and shouted, "Give me drugs!"

The nurses and receptionists were already running to the rescue, but there wasn't room enough for all of us around the doctor. And of course the conveyor belt kept depositing more people every few seconds.

I don't know who threw the first punch. All I know is people suddenly started swinging. There was a lot of "Oof" and "Hey" and "You son of a bitch!" and people kept pounding on each other. The doctor and the nurses

were hopping around like frogs, trying to stay out of it, but I saw one nurse wind up and take a good crack at the doctor when he wasn't looking, so I edged over toward her and said, "Hey, don't hit him or we'll be here all night."

"Him?" she said. "He doesn't know squat about medicine." We had to shout to be heard over the fight.

"Do you?" I asked.

"Sure. What's your problem?" She pulled me back toward the wall just in time to avoid the old man's wildly flailing cane. Ilsa and David came over, too, and we all hid behind one of those wheeled carts full of stuff.

"It's our Morph," I said. "She flowed over Edgar and then got all hard. I'm afraid...the doctor said she's dead." I tried not to get all choked up, because she was the Pain after all, but it was hard.

"I don't think that's as big a problem for Morphs as it is for us," the nurse said. "They're a lot tougher than we are."

"Yeah, but dead is dead, isn't it?" David asked.

"Not necessarily. Is that her?"

She pointed at Edgar, who had waded into the middle of the fray and was trying to take the cane away from the old man. The old man was whacking at his side, but Annie was acting like a suit of armor, so it didn't matter.

"That's her," Ilsa said.

"Here, let's try this," said the nurse, taking a couple of round disks with handles on them from the cart. The guy with the cane had turned his attention to Edgar's head, so she waited until Edgar backed up close to us, then reached out and shoved the disks against his Annie-covered shoulderblades.

There was a flash and a "zzzzt!" like the time David stuck a fork into a light socket, and suddenly Annie whoofed out like an air bag in a collision, only she wasn't smooth like an airbag; she was all spikes. Hard spikes. The old man's cane hit one right on the point and stuck there, and he couldn't pull it loose.

The fight stopped just like that.

"Wow," I said. "How'd you know it would do that?"

"We have a Morph in our family, too," said the nurse. "She dies on us all the time."

"I've got to pee!" Edgar shouted. "Annie, let me go!" He whirled around, looking for a bathroom, nearly taking out half the people around him with the old man's cane.

Annie shrank down a little and started to crawl away from his chest. He helped her out, ripping her loose and dropping her on the floor, then running for a door just a few feet away. I didn't think it was a bathroom — it looked more like the doctor's office — but he went on through and closed the door behind him.

"Annie?" I asked, bending down and putting my hand on her now that the spikes were melting back into her body. "Annie, are you okay?"

"I think so," she said. She moved her face around so it was pointing up at me. "What happened?"

"You died," I told her. "Only the nurse zapped you back again."

"Oh. Sorry. I was just thinking, and I guess I got a little too distracted and forgot to keep my metabolism going."

"Thinking?" I asked. "What were you thinking about so hard?"

She laughed, and her body rippled. "I was trying to figure out how to be a good Pain in the Ass. I came up with quite a few ideas, too! Want me to show you?"

"No way," I told her.

Then the doctor came up to us and said to Ilsa, "You're going to pay for all this!"

"On second thought," I said to Annie, "go ahead."

That's all she needed. Within seconds, the air filled with a stink way worse than David's gym socks. People were gagging and holding their noses and jumping back on the conveyor belt. Annie slithered up onto it, too, and Ilsa and David were right behind her. I turned to the nurse long enough to say "Thanks," then went over and banged on the door that Edgar had gone through. "Meet us outside!" I yelled.

"Jecz, can't a girl have a little privacy around here?" he hollered back, but I knew he'd heard me so I followed the others down the conveyor.

There was a big crowd at the other end, and they all wanted a piece of us, but Annie drove them off with another alien stinker and we rushed on past.

Our eyes were watering by the time we got into the parking lot. We gasped for fresh air, and Ilsa said, "Enough! For god's sake, Annie, that's enough!"

"Oh, but I was just getting started," she said.

"I don't care. Behave yourself."

Edgar ran out, still zipping up his pants, and we jumped in the car and told it to take us home.


On the way, Annie said, "I thought up another neat trick. Wanna see?"

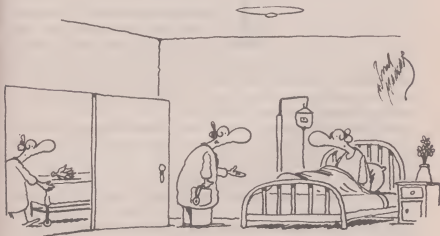
"No!" we all said at once.

"How about if I just do a little — "

"No."

I looked at my watch. Only six more hours. Then it was *my* turn to be the Pain. I already knew one of the things I would do, too. If I waited until tomorrow to finish my pie, I wouldn't have to pit the rest of the cherries. People would just have to be careful when they chewed. And that electrical trick with Annie and the spikes — I was sure I could come up with some use for that.

I could hardly wait. 



*"The heart transplant has been approved by your HMO, Mr. Nevins,
with some minor stipulations."*

Has it really been a dozen years since Jack Dann's last appearance here? It seems that "Sentry," one of the stories he wrote with Jack C. Haldeman II that ultimately went into the novel High Steel, marked his last publication in these pages way back in 1988. Of course, most of you readers will have seen his name elsewhere, probably on one of his more recent novels such as The Silent and The Memory Cathedral (and maybe you've been lucky enough to get a copy of his latest, Bad Medicine, which has only been published on his home turf of Australia). Or perhaps you've seen the award-winning anthology he coedited with his wife Janeen Webb, Dreaming Down-Under. But here he is again, and we're happy to report that in addition to this iconic fantasia, we've got more stories coming from him in the future. (Incidentally, if you'd like to hear John Heard perform an adaptation of this story, look up the Seeing Ear Theatre at www.scifi.com.)

Marilyn

By Jack Dann

I WAS FOURTEEN, AND SHE was stone white and naked and blond. She was hazed in the pale cold light pouring in from the frost-shrouded

windows of my bedroom, and I remember the dustmotes floating in the mid-afternoon sunshine, I remember the luminous living clouds of dust swirling around her great diaphanous wings, which seemed to shudder as she stepped toward the bed...my bed.

Those wings were white as tissue and seemed as fragile, as if they would break or crack or tear with the merest motion or gust of wind, and I remember her green-flecked eyes staring at me as she moved across my bedroom, which was filled with books and magazines and forty-five rpm records and pre-cut balsa models of World War II fighter planes (including a British Supermarine Spitfire MK XII that would be fitted with radio control) in various stages of completion, and I couldn't help myself, I looked at her breasts and at her naturally dark mat of pubic hair, and I was so terrified that I closed my eyes.

I remember, as if it had happened last month, rather than forty years ago.

It was the year that Buddy Holly, the Big Bopper, and Richie Valens were killed in a plane crash in Iowa. Alaska became the 49th State, which brought Texas down a peg, and Hawaii became the 50th. *Rio Bravo* and *Ben Hur* came out that year; Navy beat Army 43-12, and Mafia boss Joseph Barbara and forty of his "delegates" got busted at his house in Appalachin, which was about fifteen miles away from my home town in upstate New York.

I found the old book after my father died in 1987.

I was searching through the bedroom closet that he had always locked, and I was lost in the smells of cedar and old clothes — there were old leather key rings and wallets, a lifetime member Playboy card, a stiletto knife that he had taken away from me when I was sixteen, a taped envelope that contained an old black and white Polaroid photograph of a dark-haired buxom woman — certainly not my mother — wearing the skimpy outfit of a belly dancer, and there were tuxedo studs and cufflinks and silver pens and penknives, playing cards backed with photographs of nude women, white plastic collar stays of varied size, check registers, an old will in a manila envelope, letters tied with a black ribbon, expired insurance policies, a woman's red silk handkerchief, and my paperback edition of *The Fundamentals of Self-Hypnosis and Yoga: Theory, Practice, and Application*, by Julian Rammurti, M. A., M. D. Its spine was broken and pages fell out as I held it open in my palm.

Dad had never told me he had taken the book. Nor had he ever told me that he had taken the stiletto.

I remember how keenly I had felt the loss of the book at the time. But that was only because it was mine...because it was the first book I'd found on the subject...and because it worked. I could find other books on yoga and hypnotism, which I did. I lived in libraries and learned clinical theories and models and techniques, and I'd even developed a flair for stage hypnotism, which was the antithesis of the careful, quiet clinical process. For an instant — standing there in my father's closet, a grown man discovering the secrets of his youth, savoring the presence of the living past — I saw myself as if in a mirror: a thin, gangly, pimply-faced boy of fourteen again, straight brown hair greased back with pomade, red button-down shirt, collar raised, leather jacket, black pegged pants. The boy

sneered into those books, indeed, as if he were looking into a mirror. A poor reflection of Elvis.

Reading...reading about posthypnotic suggestion and methods for creating the state of *yoganidra*. The powers of *tratakam*. Lucid Dreaming. The state of somnambulism. Hypermnesia. *Prana* and *Pranayama*. The story of the man and the bear.

I've often remembered that story of the man and the bear. It went something like this: There was a psychiatrist who was wounded in France during the Second World War. As he recuperated in a military hospital in Cornwall, he grew bored and occupied himself with a posthypnotic suggestion. He'd hypnotized himself and conjured up a great bear to provide some comic relief from the day to day boredom. All he had to do was say "Bear" and count to five and miraculously, a huge white polar bear with a long, flexible neck would stroll upright into the ward, leap about in the aisles, try to mount the nurses, frolic around the other patients, or hunch against the psychiatrist's bed and allow himself to be petted. So the bear cavorted in the mornings and afternoons, and likewise all the psychiatrist had to do was count to five and the bear would disappear. The bear had no weight, made no noise, could somersault in the air, walk on the ceiling, deftly unbutton nurses' blouses with its curved yellow claws, remove bras, and dance with any of the variously undressed doctors, nurses, patients, and visitors, who were never the wiser. The psychiatrist also conjured up the bear every night as an antidote to counting sheep, but the apparition soon began to take on a different, more ominous aspect in the dark. It became more aggressive, would not always obey commands, and when it leered, a feat the psychiatrist was certain no other bear could manage, its fangs seemed much longer than they had been during the day. So the psychiatrist mumbled "Bear," counted to five, and disappeared his ill-conceived creation.

But the bear was not so easily dismissed.

It appeared the next night, unbidden, and the next day it snapped at the nurses and bit the psychiatrist on the forearm. A warning. Although it left no marks, of course, the psychiatrist was in excruciating pain for hours.

The psychiatrist had to hypnotize himself three times to get rid of it. Nor did that work...entirely; and years later, the bear would oftimes

appear — a vague, threatening form in the distance — and follow the psychiatrist, who developed the disconcerting habit of always looking behind him.

SO I LAY ON TOP of the prickly wool blankets of my neatly made bed and waited for Marilyn Monroe to come to me, to change me completely — change me from an awkward, pimply-faced adolescent into a full-blooded man who knew the moist secrets of women, who'd actually and really been laid, even if through the devices and snares of an altered state of consciousness known only to hypnotists and young dabblers in the arcane such as myself.

It didn't matter how I did it. What mattered was that I did it.

I had floated, fallen, drifted, breathed myself into the deepest, most profound state of hypnosis. I had imagined myself rowing a boat on a calm, shallow, infinite sea; every breath took me farther out upon the placid ocean, breathing in, breathing out, skiffing in smooth clockwork motion, each breath out, each breath in taking me farther, farther into a calm azure place without depth, without horizon; yet I could feel everything around me: the wool of the blanket itching my neck, the cold smoothness of the pillowcase as I moved my head, the cold chill seeping in through the windows, and I saw her in that instant as I blinked open my eyes and shut them tight again. The woman who inhabited every adolescent male's dream. Walking toward me, a look of blond rapture on her painted full-lipped face — six shades of lipstick, I knew about that, Marilyn I love you, and I waited for her, waited in the dark bosom of my self-directed dream, waited for her to come upon me, slip beside me, touch me, guide me, sail me across the sea of my quickening breathing, sail me out of my virginity.

I would lose my cherry to an apparition, a ghost, an hallucination, but at fourteen, in North Leistershire, New York, population 16,000, in 1959, that was the best I could hope for.

With my eyes closed — I do believe they were closed, but perhaps they were not — I could feel her walking toward me, past the built-in, beige-painted bookshelves that housed my father's mystery collection, which he'd always kept in my room, past the door that connected to my parents' bedroom...walking under all the mobiles and models that floated just

below the ceiling and defied gravity by mere threads; and then she was standing over me, standing beside the bed, standing beside my slippers and sneakers and cordovan dress shoes, and I *knew* that she was leaning, leaning over me now — I could hear her shallow, patient breathing and the rustling whispering of her wings, smell her overly sweet perfume mixed with a more acrid, damp odor — and all I would have to do was take her in my arms, she would fall into my arms like pillows and soft toys and cushions; and all I had to do was open my eyes to see her breasts and I could raise my hands to touch them.

All I had to do was open my eyes.

I tried. I *had* to see her. I had memorized her from a hundred photographs: the mole above her swelled lips, the eyelashes heavy as cardboard, the eyelids white as chalk, the earrings dangling, everything about her swollen and curved and fleshy and full of promises —

But in that instant, in that terrible instant of realization or proffered possibility, I felt everything change. I know it was my own fault, my own perverse nature, but somehow I suddenly changed the rules. Much as I desired to bring Marilyn's warm body close to my own, to enter her and lose everything I hated and instantly gain my manhood, I imagined something else instead.

In that terrifying, transforming instant I imagined that whatever I was most afraid of now stood in Marilyn's place, and I dared not open my eyes for fear of what I would see, yet I was afraid to keep them closed because it was unbearable *not* to see what was looming over me, suffocating me, watching me; and I remember the slow-motion tossing and turning and shaking, as the sea I had drifted too far upon began to rage and rise; and, in fact, I was caught between fear and desire. I could not tell how long the convulsion lasted, but once I awakened to the world of slanting sunlight and the familiar smell of bedsheets and air-freshener, I vowed never to hypnotize myself again.

After that Marilyn never came to me in my dreams, but the dark thing that I had conjured in her place shadowed me.

Like the psychiatrist who kept looking over his shoulder to check whether his great white bear was tailing him, so did I feel the presence of my apparition. But unlike the psychiatrist, who at least knew his enemy,

I could only sense this manifestation of my fears. In my teens I thought of it as a monster shaped something like a bear, and I imagined its claws tapping on macadam or sidewalks, and I would turn quickly, just to check, and, of course, there would never be anything there, at least not anything untoward. Over the years, I gave up on monsters, for they, too, ceased to inhabit my dreams. My dreams had one recurrent element, and that was more an experience of synesthesia: they would all, at one stage or another, take on the color of deep purple, yet the color would be more like damp mist, which felt thick and ominous and signaled danger, but the mist was the stuff of the world in my dreams, and it would bleed out of the sky and buildings and people — just as it would bleed out of myself — dying my monochrome dreams with purple fear and anxiety and uncertainty.

But I wasn't the beast entirely. Only part of it.

The dreams coalesced into reality one numbingly cold dark morning in Vietnam.

It was January 1969. We'd been stuffed into a deuce-and-a-half, one of three trucks going out of Phu Bai down south where the fighting was supposed to be heating up. Everybody was shivering, and I remember sitting perfectly still because it was warmer that way, and Joey Mantaneo was pushed against me like four o'clock on the D-train going to Brooklyn, and even in the cold he smelled like cordite and rot and piss (and that cordite smell should have alerted me that something bad was crawling toward me), and he had his war name SCARED SHITLESS painted across his flack jacket and stenciled on his helmet like he was military police, and I knew the story about how he got his name — but he was the only one in Bravo who'd never been wounded or sick, not even an infection when he cut his finger. He claimed he was a street fighter and his gang was called "The Road Gents," even though nobody in the gang had a car, and he said he knew as much about killing before he came out here as he did after, but he always looked scared — he just had that kind of a face — and when he was green somebody said he was scared shitless and so he took that name for himself. The guy who named him was dead, but SCARED SHITLESS wasn't. Neither was BURNT COP and CALL ME WHITE, and they'd been brought up in a black bopping gang in Philadelphia called "The Flicks," whatever the hell that meant, and the rest of the guys were farmers or

factory workers or mechanics — I was the only college boy, and they called me "Professor" — and they named themselves BORN TO DIE, BORN TO KILL, KILL OR BE KILLED, KILLER ANGEL, and if you believed everybody, every one of them was a stoned killer street fighter and a drug-dealer and a hustler and a pussy-magnet, but we were all just kids. Full of piss and vinegar eight months ago, but now exhausted and sick with the shits and fungus and getting bald and everything else. And while the goddamn truck rocked and jittered in the muddy craters that was supposed to be the convoy route — I was black and blue from being thrown around in that can — everybody was singing and whistling "Reach Out, I'll Be There," and then "Mellow Yellow," and Cop and Manteneo and Sammy Chitester were singing in falsetto, so it sounded like we had women in the chorus, and then everybody did Otis Redding's "Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay," and they were pretty good.

We sounded like a rock band without microphones coming through the storm that had kept up for days, and it seemed like the world was going to stay dark and moonlit forever; and everything was covered with leaves that blew all over like home in October, but nothing else was like home: the houses along the way that were still standing were burned and pitted from shells, and there were refugees who looked like they ought to be dead and buried walking along the road; some were wounded, and although the old people didn't seem to pay any attention to us, the rest looked at us like we were the enemy; they hated us, even though they were too afraid to say word one; and we just crashed and bounced and sang and whistled through the dark, through the rain and fog, and you would have thought you were at the south pole or something where it was twilight all the time, and then we blew out our transmission, and although a few of the guys got on the other two trucks, the rest of us marched.

We went twenty clicks before we finally bivouacked in a deserted village that wasn't far from the Citadel of Hue.

It was cold and wet and dark and I couldn't stop shivering.

Viet Cong could have been all around us, for all we could tell, even though we'd caught up with our trucks and guards were posted and the place was secured, but I didn't care about anything. None of us who'd done the marching copped guard duty, and I would have fallen asleep if I had; it was as if someone had pushed a button and all the life just went out of

me. I couldn't even eat or relieve myself. I just wrapped myself up in my poncho liner and fell asleep in an empty hooch. There were bits of glass all over the floor that would sometimes catch the light like little green and yellow and orange and blue gems, the kind sold in the hobby stores along with crystals and beads, but I didn't dream about that...I didn't dream about jewels and beads and velvet and cold empty darkness.

I didn't dream at all.

But dreams or no dreams, we were up before first light, and our orders were to go the rest of the way, wherever that was going to be, on foot because they needed the trucks up north (where it was safe), and so we watched the deuces drive off and then we walked to paradise. That's what it looked like, anyway, and before we realized what was happening, most of us were dead. Only Joey Mantaneo and I survived, and Joey, of course, didn't even get a scratch, but he suffered later, went half-crazy with recurring nightmares; at least that was what I heard, only I can't to this day remember who I heard that from.

I didn't suffer any nightmares...after that I couldn't remember my dreams.

We were approaching the south bank of the Perfume River, and there were the smashed walls of what had once been beautiful French-style villas of the southern sector of Hue; and spread out before us was lush grass and fog swirling like we were walking on a carpet through clouds — the grass was deep green from all the rain, but there was a metal smell to the air; and although that mist didn't look purple, like in my childhood dreams, I sensed that this place was wrong, that it was hazy and purple and that the purple was about to bleed out from the sky and me and everyone else, but I just couldn't quite see it yet.

For all that I just said, this place was picture-perfect: a lone sampan on the river, an old man riding a bicycle up the avenue that ran along the park, for we were walking through a park. I remember breathing in and looking around, and then I saw a flash and heard an explosion, and Mantaneo screamed "Motherfuckers!" or maybe that was me, but it didn't matter because there was another explosion and I realized that I was lying flat on the ground and looking up at the sky and watching watching watching for the purple, watching waiting for the change, please God make this just a dream, and I heard a gurgling noise and a wheezing noise,

and I remembered the training film I'd seen on sucking chest wounds, and I just figured my chest had been blown out and I was dying, but I didn't think "Oh my God I'm dying" or "Mamma."

Everything was still and cold and quiet as a winter morning, and Marilyn came to me, just like she did the first time.

I could smell her damp perfume and then I could feel her coming toward me and studying me like she was a doctor and I was a patient, and then she lay down on top of me, straddling me; her pale face pressed against my neck, her stiff blond hair tickling my chin and lips; and I could feel her body moving against mine, and her wings, feathered white, layers and layers of down, covered us, sheltered us, and I felt myself inside her, felt the cold ether wetness, felt myself being drawn into her, into down, into feathers, into the swirling mists of cloud, drawn into a silent, cold heaven.

MANTANEO SAVED my ass that day by pulling me into one of the VC's tunnels, and we hid in a dark, damp, earthy room. By all rights, we should have met up with its owner; but, as I said earlier, Mantaneo always had the right luck and never got hurt. The way I heard it later, he just waited until the VC left and somehow managed to keep me alive.

I never saw him again to thank him.

And, of course, I don't *remember* what happened.

After I came back to the World, as we called coming home in those days, I waited for Marilyn. I liked to think that she came to me every night in my dreams. But since I couldn't remember dreaming, it was moot.

My shrink told me that once I'd worked it all out and regained my health, I'd remember my dreams again. The shrink, of course, attributed everything to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which had become the fashionable diagnosis for everything that had happened to every grunt in 'Nam. I argued that I didn't exhibit any of the other symptoms of PTSD: diminished interest in activities, feelings of detachment from others, exaggerated startle responses, sleep disturbances, survivor guilt, memory impairment, recurrent dreams of a traumatic event, or trouble concentrating. I'd put myself through law school — memorized the Uniform

Commercial Code and fifty cases a night, and I won't believe you can do *that* without concentration and a good memory. But he was not to be dissuaded. He figured that I was having nightly traumas; I just couldn't remember them.

I couldn't argue that kind of logic, so I stopped seeing him.

Eventually, of course, I started dreaming again, and I was, indeed, having recurrent dreams, but whether or not they were traumatic, I couldn't tell you because all I could remember was that they were about wings — gauzy, translucent wings that sometimes looked like feathers, sometimes like down, and sometimes like the surface of a soap bubble. I suppose I became obsessed by the very idea, obsessed with flying frogs and flying dragons and flying fish, with horseshoe bats and redwings and griffon vultures and hummingbirds, with hawk moths and wasps and hovel flies...and with those who like me couldn't fly. I spent hours at the botanical gardens watching the swans and remembering Marilyn's wings fanning and spreading, and I wondered, I tried to remember: were they white and feathery or were they gossamer rainbows settling around me like silken sheets, billowing, as alive as the surface of the sea?

I usually remembered them as white and feathery.

The wings of angels.

I started dating blond women — how I yearned for pale skin and white-bleached hair — and then I married a petite, dark-haired woman, may she rest in peace, and we had children and lay in bed every night, and some nights she knew I wasn't with her. I would dream pretend that she was someone else, and then for an instant the sheets would become wings.

Josiane died of ovarian cancer under cool white sheets.

I had always thought that the next time — if there were ever to be a next time — I would find myself looking at the monster that was unseen but terrifyingly present when I'd first conjured Marilyn out of an old book about hypnosis.

Every night I lived with the anticipation, with the desire and the fear — waiting for Marilyn, or the monster, Marilyn, monster; and my bones grew, my hormones changed, as did the color of my hair — from blond to brown to gray, as the years passed me through Binghamton Central High

School, Broome Community College, Vietnam with its smells of cordite and damp familiar colors of fear, Hofstra University in Hempstead, Long Island, where I drove a Buick Le Sabre and wore tie-dyed T-shirts, Brooklyn Law School, clerking for Bernstein, Haversham, Lunquist, Esqs. — from associate to junior to senior partner, from Brooklyn to Brooklyn Heights to Manhattan to Connecticut; marriage, children, vacations, fourteen-hour days, weekends on Fire Island, divorce, reconciliation, death, Josiane's dead, say it, admit it, there, fact, and through it all, through all the empty and disconnected nights, all that was left were desire and fear. My whole life a moment wrapped around anticipations of dreams...or nightmares.

Marilyn or the monster.

I did finally find them.

I'd received an invitation from my old unit to attend a reunion. It had been thirty years. I looked for Joey Mantaneo in the columns of names and addresses between the grainy photographs, but he wasn't mentioned. I was listed alphabetically, home address, home phone, business phone, just like all the other officers and noncoms and grunts. There I was, a ghost in black letter type, but Joey had disappeared.

That night I dreamed about him.

While the bedroom television blinked ghostly light into my bedroom I allowed myself to follow him, skipping around time like it was an old neighborhood, and I found him in Bayonne, New Jersey, where he was working as an electrician for the building firm of Calley & La Cross, or so I dreamed; and Joey's wife was named Louise, and he had three daughters, Marsha, Missie, and Maeve, and in that dream I'd forgotten the names of my own daughters, but didn't follow that trail, lest I dwell upon how I'd failed my children and my wife, and how I — but that wasn't important; I was following Joey. I'd always be safe with Joey because he was a survivor; he survived, survived the bopping gangs and the drugs and everything else and I wouldn't let myself drift back into Vietnam, but Joey led me right back. He took me through his father's candystore and showed me how he'd grown up. He took me to Larry's Bar, which was across the street from his three-bedroom apartment on Stadler Avenue, and we sat at the bar, which had a brass rail to rest your feet on, and we drank

boilermakers, dropping the shot-glasses filled with Johnny Red right into the beer mugs — all the regulars had their own personal mug at Larry's. We drank three shots and beers, and I felt an overwhelming sadness as I looked at Joey, an overwhelming longing. He had lost most of his hair, had put on weight, which changed the shape of his face — took out the definition and sharp, clean good looks and replaced them with a softness that was somehow repellent; and Joey smelled bad; he was dressed in jeans and a faded shirt, and he leaned over and told me that he was still in Hue, still in Vietnam — that we were still in Hue — and that's when the dream broke apart.

It had been so real, as not to be a dream, although I knew that bits and pieces were wrong, that there was no company called Calley & La Cross; those were just names from the war, but Joey leaned toward me, then grabbed me by the shoulders and —

We tumbled into the VC's tunnel, back into that cold, damp morning near the Perfume River, and I was lying against the dirt wall, sitting up, while Joey pressed his hand against my chest and said, "Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ," and there were a few rays of light coming in from the entrance above, and they were golden and seemed as solid as the blades of ancient bronze swords, and I watched the dust swirling through them, swirling swirling and I remembered my room in Leistershire, remembered lying on the bed and counting myself into a hypnotic trance, into a deep state of somnambulism, and I was fourteen and about to conjure up Marilyn out of my adolescent desires and the light pouring in through my windows, light filled with dustmotes dancing swirling, promise, everything filled with promise and —

Then Joey stopped fussing with me, and we could hear someone scraping around above. Somebody shouted "*Chew hoi, chew hoi*," which meant surrender, but we could tell it was our own boys; we were all taught *Chew hoi, Yuh tie len, lie day* — surrender, come out with your hands up, and then concussion, blinding light, the cracking of thunder, and then silence as my ears popped, and I felt sudden wetness all over me, sonovabitch whoever was up there couldn't wait to take prisoners, or find out who the hell we were, and I wiped my face, everything smeared with blood, Joey, Joey was all over me. I looked around, light now pouring in from the entrance that was forward and above, pouring in like mist, which

swirled, turning everything to blood, and I was holding Joey's torso, but his arms and legs and head had been blown off, and I was a liar, he wasn't lucky, or maybe he was.

I closed my eyes, but the blood and light and mist could not be closed out; rather everything slowly darkened to purple, and I could feel myself tossing and shaking in slow motion, and I remembered having convulsions before, but now it didn't matter if I closed my eyes or opened them, I'd found the monster — Joey, Joey, goddamn it, and I screamed and opened my eyes and the mist the fog cleared and I could see her, standing in the entrance that was flooded with light, pure blazing sunlight, cold winter morning light. She was moonlight white, and naked, and her eyes were drawn in black and her lips were smeared with blood and as she reached toward me, coaxing me out of the earth, her wings spread out reflexively; they were butterfly blue fans, deep azure, darkening, darkening into purple black, and they quivered, trembling to the meter of her perfectly measured pulse, and I remember

I remember

I whispered "Mamma"

Just like every other grunt who thought he was about to die. ☹



"Sorry, I can't make it. I'm tied up."

Since he retired to New Orleans a few years back, Bert Cowdrey has become one of our most popular contributors, regaling us with both supernatural fantasies and well-imagined science fiction tales like his recent "Crux." "The Stalker" is another delight of the first sort.

The Stalker

By Albert E. Cowdrey

"GOD, IT'S NICE TO KNOW you've been an asshole, too," said Terry in his quiet, friendly way.

We were real comfortable, sitting in busted chairs in the office behind my French Quarter antique shop and working on a nice California Merlot. It was a rainy night, a night for talk, and I'd been telling him a sad story from, oh, nineteen, maybe twenty years before, when I picked up and brought home from Ched's Lounge a very small, fragile female named Willie.

My object had been the usual one, but it hadn't worked out as I expected. Was it her fragility, her delicate china-cup beauty, the sense I had that she might break in my hands if I wasn't careful? Anyway, instead of enjoying and then forgetting a one-night stand, I became — well, I guess the word is *besotted* with her.

For the first and last time in my prosy damn life, I took to writing sonnets. I compared her shy beauty to the flower of the purple wood sorrel and her pure voice to the song of the mockingbird. I must have been really disgusting for a while. Then my store was burgled — clearly an inside job

— and Willie disappeared. Well, the burglar left his fingerprints all over everything, and the cops caught the big coarse dumb lout and recovered most of the loot.

Do I need to say that he was Willie's lover? He went to Angola and Willie just vanished, I never knew where.

"I went through something a bit like that," said Terry. "Only more...offbeat."

He sighed and slowly detached his feet from his Gucci loafers and wiggled his silk-socked toes and started to look a little less like a tax lawyer and more like a human being. I had hired him for combat with the IRS and we'd become friends mainly out of mutual loneliness—Terry was living with five dogs, and for the time being I was living with nobody.

I settled back comfortably. With wine gurgling in my gut and the rain coming down in nine-foot cubes, I felt ready to listen to Terry's tale of how he, too, was betrayed by love and beauty. But I was not expecting anything like what I heard.

You're not, Terry began, the only guy dumb enough to think you'd found love in a saloon. One night about five years ago I was in The Exile over on Toulouse Street, swilling and hunting love, when suddenly I spotted this absolutely breathtaking blond at the bar. Even then I wasn't exactly the young Richard Chamberlain, so I thought: Sure, dream on.

But then a friend of mine came by. I said, Who's that over there? And he said, Oh, that's Pat Something. He's nuts, you don't want to meet him. Oh, yes I do, I said.

So my friend introduced us, and at first Pat received me with the total lack of interest I'd anticipated. Until I happened to say I was a lawyer, and then he said, Oh really? Maybe you can help me. I asked him what kind of trouble he was in, and he said he was being stalked.

I said, Maybe I can help. I was thinking, Sex maniac, I can believe that; skinhead, I can believe that. Pat said, I'm being stalked by a demon, and I thought, I can't believe that.

But the guy was gorgeous, so I said, Why don't we go to my place? I live right down the street and we can talk this over. He gave me a despairing look and said, I can't have sex right now.

Hey, I said with a smile, I'm not one of those guys like John F. Kennedy

have to have sex every night or they can't sleep. Pat asked, Is John a friend of yours? I thought he was kidding, so I gave him an encouraging smile.

We left The Exile and walked, mostly in silence, to my house and I let us in. In those days I only had two dogs, but they greeted us joyously and Pat seemed to relax a little, tussling with them while I got us fresh drinks. And hey, he was even more gorgeous with his hair tousled and dog spit all over his face than he had been when he was nice and neat.

So we relaxed a little and then I got professional and said, Now tell me, Pat, how did this stalking begin? Thinking that once I found out who was doing it I might do something, get a restraining order or something, endearing myself to Pat in the process. So very slowly, at times in a trembling voice, he began to tell me his story.

Pat had been living at home with his mother in some ugly place down near the Projects. He was a slum flower, I guess you might say; he must have been kind of a steel magnolia, too, because he grew up a sissy in a neighborhood where sissies are killed routinely. His mother drew welfare and worked part-time as a barmaid and she lived with a succession of guys who were all given the honorary title of Pat's father. Pat was thinking about moving out anyway when his final father came along.

By then Pat's mother wasn't as young as she used to be. Time was when the guys called her Skinny Minny, but at thirty-nine she had a pot belly and other signs of hard use and advancing years. Her men were no longer like the John Travolta of *Saturday Night Fever*, they were more like the John Travolta of *Pulp Fiction*. So when Pat came home after a hard day's work as a busboy at Jour et Nuit and heard familiar sounds from the bedroom he figured he knew what to expect. Minnie was in the sack with her latest toad.

The house was a shotgun — one room behind the other — so he had to walk through her bedroom to get to his own. He knocked and yelled and then waltzed in.

They had pulled up a tufted pink bedspread, but even so Pat had to make an effort not to gawk at the freak Minny had connected with this time. He was bald and his skull had strange bumps like little horns over the temples. He had a lantern jaw and protruding eyes and his lower left canine tooth was permanently outside his mouth. It stuck up and kind of fitted into a notch it had worn in his upper lip. Incredibly, he had only

three fingers and a thumb on each hand, and it wasn't because he'd been in some industrial accident or something, it was because he was born that way. He was the single ugliest man Pat had ever seen, and he couldn't imagine how she could let him touch her, much less anything else.

"I suppose," I suggested, "that he had hidden charms. Hidden under the bedspread, that is."

"You know it," said Terry. "The sounds from his mother's bedroom kept Pat awake all the first night of Bodeau's reign — that was his name, by the way, Pat figured he must be a Cajun roughneck from the oil rigs. The old rusty box spring squeaked, and Minny squealed, and Bodeau grunted, and this went on until the dawn's early light."

"More wine?" I asked, and Terry said, "Definitely."

On his way out, he went on, Pat had to walk through his mother's room again, and there was Minny sleeping the sleep of the exhausted beside Bodeau, who was snoring with his eyes open and only the whites showing. One of Bodeau's feet was sticking out from under the covers and it had only three toes on it, all with long sharp nails.

Pat was staring hypnotized at this spectacle when the snoring stopped and Bodeau's right hand shot out and grabbed his wrist. That was when Pat realized something else. Bodeau was the strongest man he had ever had grab him, and in his short life quite a few had grabbed him. The bedspread slipped a little as Bodeau rose to a sitting position and Pat became aware that the guy had shoulders like King Kong, including the fur. Bodeau pulled Pat close to him and grinned into his face. He had dragon's breath and his teeth were brownish and round like pegs, with spaces in between.

Bodeau said one word. He said *Later*.

Then he slumped back and started to snore again, and his eyes rolled up until only the whites showed. Pat stood there paralyzed for a while, and then crept out of the house and never went back.

Pat had had some experience with bisexual "fathers" who viewed his mother and himself as, shall we say, main course and dessert. Or sometimes as appetizer and main course. But none of them had been flat-out disgusting, one or two had actually had a touch of savoir-faire, as if life was after all a French farce, so why not enjoy it? But Bodeau did not seem to be into

savoir-faire, or French farces, or anything except violent barnyard sex with anybody he could catch, male or female. No holes, you might say, barred.

So Pat ran.

For a while his friends took care of him. This guy loaned him a clean shirt, that guy let him sleep on the sofa. They all screwed him sooner or later because he was kind of a damsel in distress, and you know what generally happens to damsels in distress. Then Bodeau started tracking him. One day Pat looked out of the kitchen at Jour et Nuit and there he was, peering in through the window from the street. That night Pat woke up to a skreeking sound and there was Bodeau, standing outside the window and scratching on the glass with a sound like a nail on a blackboard. What took it out of the realm of the merely scary and into the hair-raising was the fact that that window happened to be three stories up with no balcony.

Pat yelled for his friend and his friend came, and of course there was nothing outside the window. That was when Pat started to get the reputation of being crazy.

Every time Bodeau appeared he came closer. Pat moved on to another friend's, and the very first morning he was getting ready to go to work, standing in front of a steamy bathroom mirror and combing his hair. As the steam cleared he saw Bodeau behind him. He staggered, turned and — nothing. Nothing was there. That night when Pat was under the covers with his new host, he woke up because his friend seemed to be breathing more noisily than usual. Pat reached out to touch him and he found, under the covers, a three-fingered hand.

Next thing he knew, Pat was running down Bourbon Street in his briefs in the rain while heavy feet smacked wetly on the pavement behind him. The barkers and the few people who were out obviously couldn't see what was chasing him, they just yelled and whistled. I guess they thought Pat was advertising a gay bar or something.

Eventually he got back to the house he was staying in, and his friend asked him what in the hell did he mean, jumping out of bed like that and running out into the rain?

"One more bottle," I suggested, fetching a decent Cabernet from a file drawer labeled INVOICES. Terry nodded thankfully.

"I have to admit your story is a lot more interesting than mine," I told him.

"Thank you," said Terry. He sniffed the wine and then went on:

PAT TOLD ME that the thought of ultimately having to screw Bodeau was making all sex revolting to him. He said he was ready to enter a convent and take vows of chastity if only he would never have to submit to this creature. The trouble was, he didn't think Bodeau cared anything about convents and would come and abduct him and maybe take the Mother Superior, too, while he was at it. And what could he do?

He started to cry, sitting on my couch with my two dogs looking at him anxiously and wondering what was wrong. I comforted him and got myself all hot and bothered in the process, but whether he was merely having a violent stress reaction (which I thought was about a ninety-nine percent possibility), or whether he had actually caught the eye of a three-toed, three-fingered Cajun demon (one percent possibility?), I couldn't offhand see anything to be done. Take him to a shrink? Look for an exorcist?

What I actually did was put him to bed, crawl in after him, and lie there quietly holding him with my five-fingered hands until he went to sleep. Which was quite a while. I stayed awake as long as I could and then I conked out, too. For a little over a week we lived together, and during that time I never laid a hand on him except to give comfort — I swear it. As for the pleasure of his company, well...

Pat was, I think, the most ignorant boy I ever met. You could sit him in front of the TV and he would watch either a cartoon show or wrestling (for the tight pants) or Geraldo. For music he liked heavy metal groups, especially Flesheater and Slash'n'Burn, which were big at the time. I bought him a Walkman and stuck the earphones in his ears, and he'd sit there glassy-eyed, getting his young eardrums punctured.

He was pathetically amazed by ordinary pieces of information. He'd never heard of income tax. He thought Europe was a northern state. He thought safe sex meant doing it with a guy who wouldn't beat hell out of you. The acme of grandeur he could imagine was taking a trip to Miami Beach. I told him he could go with me to Venice next summer on my regular holiday and stay at Daniele's, and he looked disappointed but said

hopefully, Maybe Miami some other time? And I said, Yes, if you want to. Anywhere.

I'd never felt like this before. Here this beautiful nineteen-year-old was in my grasp, and I wasn't, in the usual sense, doing anything about it. I was caring for Pat, protecting him from demons either real or imaginary, and demanding nothing in return. This dumb kid from the Projects had opened a window of generosity in my acquisitive lawyer's heart and I loved him for it.

I would watch him sitting in the lamplight turning the pages of *Gentlemen's Attire*, and he would look so little and helpless that my heart turned to Silly Putty inside me. Say, I hope I'm not disgusting you, talking this way.

"No more than I've disgusted myself on many occasions," I said, refilling his glass. "It is a kind of madness, isn't it?"

"You know it. But at the time it was more like a dream. Here I'd done what I had hoped, I'd found love in a bar. Sooner or later I believed Pat would get over his dementia or whatever, and he would kind of fold himself up and deposit himself in my arms like a well-wrapped Christmas present. And wow, was I looking forward to the opening.

"Soon, I thought, we'll be lovers in every sense and I'll educate him, I'll show him the world, I'll dress him in every expensive overpleated garment in *Gentleman's Attire* if he wants, and we'll live and love and grow old together. God, I felt like I was living an E.M. Forster novel."

He sighed. I was about to ask him what had gone wrong, but then I saw he was going to tell me anyway. So I shut up and waited.

Eight nights after I had found Pat in The Exile (Terry continued) we were doing exactly what I've described, sitting in my house peacefully, and every once in a while he would raise his head and gaze at me as if to be sure I was really there, and every time he did I would get the Silly Putty sensation again. And suddenly the dogs began to bark.

They were named Punch and Judy, just dog dogs, you know, guys I found on the street panhandling for garbage and brought home partly out of compassion and partly for security. Well, they had always been good barkers, but right now they were outdoing themselves. They were standing just inside the front door and Punch was furious and Judy was

hysterical. The only gun I had was a Ruger .22, so I went and got it. Pat was staring in horror at the door and the dogs never shut up a second. I tried to put on my most John Wayne type of voice and yelled, Awright! Who's there, goddamn it!

Then I got this funny feeling, this trembling in my breastbone. The sort of thing you feel when you're waiting for a Mardi Gras parade and when it's still a long way off your bones start to tremble to the reverberations of the bass drum. Then a sound began like an approaching jet that's lost its way and grew to a hysterical roar that set the dishes tinkling in the china cabinet. My chess set was standing out on a table and the pieces started to dance and the Black Queen fell over and then the White King. It was like living through the big one in Kobe. First Judy broke and ran and then Punch, both of them peeing on the floor as they went. The roar increased almost beyond bearing and then began to diminish as if an express train was roaring past. It passed through the rooms and faded and finally vanished.

I turned around slowly. A mirror on the wall was smashed. At first I thought it was because the sound had broken it, but later I realized that I had fired a .22 bullet into it without noticing what I was doing. The couch where Pat had been sitting was empty. I slowly walked through the rooms of my little house. Judy was hiding under the bed and Punch was backed into a corner, snarling and smelling like a glue pot. And aside from a couple pieces of broken glassware, that was all that was in the apartment.

Pat was gone. The back door was bolted on the inside and there were bars on all the windows. I can tell you this — he didn't get out in any way known to science or to common sense. Yet he was gone.

After a little silence I felt I had to say something, so I said, "That's quite a story."

Terry replied, "That's only the beginning."

The next day, he went on, I reported Pat as a missing person and got the kind of reception from the cops you'd expect. Fag's boyfriend deserts him — big deal.

So I went looking for Skinny Minnie. I put on old ratty clothes and figured I'd probably get bashed anyway in that neighborhood by the

Projects, but nobody bothered me except a couple of panhandlers. I started going from bar to bar, ordering a beer in each, unless it was a black place in which case I backed out hurriedly. Pat had never said that Minny liked black guys anyway. In about the fourth or fifth joint I spotted this little female with a spare tire around her middle. It was midafternoon, the time of serious drinking you might say, and she was alone except for the bartender, who was clearly bored by her conversation and moved on as soon as I joined her.

I'll skip all the preliminaries. I verified that she had a son named Pat and I told her that I figured Bodeau had kidnapped him. She said, That prick. Turned out she meant Pat. She said, Why in hell don't he get his own guys instead of stealing mine?

She seemed really aggrieved. I asked if she knew where to find Bodeau. She made me buy her a Magnolia beer and a shot of Jack in the Black before she'd answer. Then she said Bodeau was gone, that was all she knew, but he used to talk about his family who lived on the northshore. *Family*. That was a new one. I had been thinking of Bodeau as an isolated monster. But now it turned out he had some kind of kinfolk living in the woods north of Lake Pontchartrain. I had a vague but truly scary vision of a sort of backwoods commune of horned three-toed monsters, and shivered.

Minny was watching me curiously and asked why I cared. I said well, I was worried about Pat, what Bodeau might do to him. She lost interest at once. Don't worry about that little prick, she said, he's been taking care of himself a long time.

I left as she was downing the shot of Jack.

Next I went to my office and started checking a northshore telephone directory. And my God, the Bodeaus. I mean, St. Tammany isn't a Cajun parish but lots of Cajuns live there and I counted more Bodeaus than Landrys or Rabalais or Sheksnaydres. They went from Bodeau, Alonso, to Bodeau, Zite. They lived on arteries like Rte. 1019 and Gray Moss Road, and I could just imagine the little narrow blacktop roads meandering through the pines and swamps, far away from the bright lights and music of northshore urban centers like Mandeville and Slidell. Then I had a thought and checked Bodo, and hell, there were three of them, too. And there was a Beaudeau, and even a Beauxdeaux, though that really seemed a kind of disgusting excess, even for a Frenchman.

They were listed in exchanges at Pearl River and Honey Island and Folsom and Little Bougfalaya. They were all over the goddamn place, up this little back road and that little back road, and the thing was, I couldn't even be sure that the Bodeau I wanted was one of them.

Weapons. I was absolutely convinced of my inability to handle Bodeau in a fair fight, and the .22 was clearly insufficient, so I bought a snub nose .38 and a box of hollowpoints from a dealer I know. But I was still dissatisfied. Lawyers don't like to shoot people, it seems unprofessional. Talking them to death is more our style, but I felt somehow that Bodeau was unlikely to be a conversationalist. Besides, what if he really was a demon? So I did what any sane, rational man of the late 20th century would do — I went to see a witch.

"A witch," I said, with a certain skepticism in my voice. "You know a witch?"

"You know Mamalou?" Terry asked.

"Oh, the voodoo store," I said. "Yeah, yeah. She's a complete phony, you know. The only people she bewitches are tourists."

"Maybe. But I'd done some magic of my own with her taxes once, so I already had a connection. Are you sure you want to hear the rest of this? I'm drinking up all your wine."

"Never did I spill wine for a better purpose," I said, and Terry gave me a grateful smile and went on:

I went by her place one hot afternoon, and it hadn't changed a bit since the days when I taught her how to make her profits look like losses. The same New Orleans Saints T-shirts were displayed out front, and in the show window were the same disgusting postcards of naked fat people alongside fly-blown pralines and examples of what used to be called Jim Crow art and is now known as Black Heritage art. I headed to the back, and there sat yellow-skinned Mamalou behind her counter with her dirty bottles of leaves and powder, varnished alligator heads and a collection of crystals glinting in what little light there was.

We said Hi and I gave her the outline of my problem — said my lover had been kidnapped by a rival and the cops were no help.

She gave me a piercing look and said, Well I don't guess you be a narc,

Terry. Then she went behind a dusty curtain and brought back a little bottle and gave it to me, saying, You find a way to slip him this and he be out for two days. It's bitter, she added, so put it in somethin' taste strong.

I looked at the bottle of fluid and said, What is this stuff? A preparation made from mystic roots gathered in the dark of the moon? Hell no, she said, it be good old fashion chloral hydrate and it will knock your enemy ass over teakettle, gare-on-teed.

So I bought that and then, after shuffling my feet, I told her the guy might be a demon, and what should I do if he was?

She said, First gimme a round one. (That must have done her heart good, after what I'd charged her for my advice on taxes.) So I gave her the hundred, and then she said, Burn him up, Terry. No other way. Knock him out and set fire to him. If he is what you say he will burn all up and nuttin' will be left behind.

Hell of a position for an officer of the court to be in — burning people up. Even demons.

Next morning I put my career on hold and set out and drove across the World's Longest Bridge, getting scareder and more depressed the further I went. I got off the interstate quick and spent that whole day driving up and down little tiny back roads and asking directions at service stations with hand-lettered signs that said Serve Yourself, Worms, and Gatorade.

I saw poor Bodeaus and comfortable Bodeaus, all kinds of Bodeaus. Their houses included everything from imitation Taras in the pines to dirty little shacks not much bigger than the Volkswagens disintegrating in the front yards. And every single person of that name, male and female, was an ordinary man, woman or child with four fingers and a thumb on each hand and no projecting tooth in the lower jaw.

To each one who would talk to me I said I was a lawyer looking for a guy named Bodeau in connection with a small legacy, and gave a brief description. And for three days every Bodeau, Bodo, Beaudeau and Beauxdeaux said they didn't know him. Guy like dat don't belong *mah* fambly, was the usual response. Or, No, Honey, I ain't never see nobody look like what you just said, *cher*.

By the fourth day I had crossed every bloody Bodeau off my list except for one. At the house of Bodeau, Zite, the lady was out but a little girl with a very grown-up manner opened the door and when I described the Bodeau

I was looking for she said, Thass Cousin X-avier. We don't talk to him. Mama says he ain't no good and if I ever see him coming up the front walk I should take her old thirty-ought-six and let him have it.

Oh, I said, my balls freezing, he's kind of a black sheep, eh? And the little girl said, No, he ain't black, he's kind of brownish and got fur.

She closed the screen door and latched it and said, Ol' X-avier lives on Sam Boot Road and I don't know where it's at. As she disappeared inside the house I called out, Is he in the phone book? (Because my list didn't include a Bodeau, X.) She said, Why would he have a phone? Who would he talk to?

So I set out to find Sam Boot Road, which wasn't marked on the only large-scale map I'd been able to find. God, did I waste gas. Up and down and all around. And the loafers and the women who take your credit card in the gas stations — you know the ones I mean? The ones who know everything about their neighborhood, down to every local dog and the sex of its puppies? None of them would admit to knowing where Sam Boot Road was, though one did say, Yeah, there's a road by that name, just a tee-nine-sy li'l road, but where it's at exactly I don't know.

It was late afternoon and I had wasted a week in St. Tammany and found nothing. I was barreling along a blacktop highway past some pretty horse farms when suddenly I slammed on the brakes. I had seen a dirty sign that said Sam Boot Road. I backed and turned and pretty soon I was deeper in shade than I'd been all week.

I mean, the pines met over the road. It was like a tunnel. Not that there weren't signs of humanity around — garbage lying on the roadside, along with discarded plastic bottles and the remains of a butchered deer being munched by a skinny black wild dog. No horse farms on Sam Boot Road. No anything that I could see, except, nailed to a tree, a beat-up old sign that said PREPARE TO MEET. If it had once ended THY GOD, that part was gone.

Then the damn road dead-ended at another highway. However, I'd noticed one little track turning off a ways back, so I drove back and parked and got out. The track was too narrow for a car, grown up with fat weeds and it vanished into the pines and thickets of cedar and wild holly. And I followed it, scared as hell and glad to have the snub nose in my right pants pocket and wondering if I'd ever have a chance to use the knockout stuff in my left. All around me was an ordinary Southern woodland, with bugs

fiddling and clicking and so on. A big russet shadow drifted through the trees — an owl, I guess. Why he was awake at that time of day I don't know. Then I saw a fallen-apart shed or chicken coop, and then a real log cabin beyond it — hand built, I mean, with a tin roof, not the kind you order precut in a kit from some outfit in California for \$60,000 with optional hot tub. The cabin looked absolutely desolate just sitting there in the middle of a grassy clearing surrounded by old rusty iron things with spikes and cogs — agricultural implements, I guess — half swallowed by wild blackberry vines and honeysuckle.

I was standing in the trees, hesitating, not sure what to do next, when the cabin door opened and a squat figure came out wearing jeans and a blue work shirt. The guy put something under a flowerpot beside the door and then scratched his ass, scratched his head, adjusted his crotch, did all that personal stuff. At last he slouched away into the woods on the other side of the clearing. If that was Bodeau, he didn't look very impressive from a distance. I gave him a few minutes to get deep in the woods and then, taking a deep breath, I walked into the open and headed for the cabin.

Close up it still looked grim, but there were odd touches. A hummingbird feeder, for instance, with hummingbirds helicoptering around it. Wild azaleas growing as if somebody had transplanted them from the woods. Didn't seem demonic, somehow. I checked under the flowerpot, and sure enough, there was the key. I unlocked the door and gave it a shove. Oiled hinges; no squeak.

I stepped inside and it was poor but neat, with rag rugs and furniture from Goodwill and a hand-made rustic table. There was a butane stove and a little fridge and a sink. There was a steep staircase with treads but no risers, leading up to a loft. I climbed it, listening to the treads creak. I could see an unmade bed shoved back under the eaves. All of a sudden somebody snored. Christ, I almost wet my pants.

I crept like a little damn mouse up the last steps and looked over the edge of the bed. And just then Pat rolled over and opened his eyes. His blond hair was spiky from sleep and his eyes kind of gummy but his skin looked rosy and he seemed to be well. He had trouble focussing at first; he peered the way people do when they've just waked up, and then he recognized me and gave me a big smile of welcome. He kind of jingled when he moved and I sat down on the bed and hugged him. Without saying

anything he pulled the sheet aside and showed me that he was chained to a big iron staple that was driven into the log wall.

I whispered, You okay, Pat? And he said, Sure. I said, He hasn't hurt you? No, he said, Bodeau loves me, he wouldn't hurt me, and the sex has been terrific. I said kind of stupidly, You been eating okay? And he said, Yeah, Bodeau makes great *sauce piquante*, too.

I was beginning to wonder what the hell I was doing there if things were so great when Pat burst into tears and said, Oh Terry, I'm so glad to see you. I'm sure sick of being penned up in this dump. I begun to think I never would get to Miami Beach at all.

So we fixed up what to do. I guess the proper move was for me to see the Sheriff of St. Tammany and tell him that a kidnapper was holding his victim on Sam Boot Road. Or just to shoot off the chain and find Pat a pair of pants to wear and clear out. But I gave up both those ideas, listening to Pat tell about the night he disappeared from my house.

He said he was sitting there terrified, with the magazine still on his lap, when what felt like a tornado swept him up and flung him *through* the back wall so for an instant he saw the inside of the lathwork and roaches running in every direction. Then he was flying over Lake Pontchartrain in Bodeau's arms, and down below he could see the lights glimmering along the causeway and the little winking lanterns of the fishing boats. And then down through the pines, the rough branches and the needles whipping him and then through the tin roof into the cabin. He felt strange, as if he was full of bubbles, like champagne, and then he seemed to solidify and Bodeau had him in his grasp and carried him up the steps to the loft for their first night together.

If there was anything to this account at all — and frankly, I didn't think Pat was smart enough to make it up — then sheriffs and simple escape were both out. Bodeau couldn't be captured, couldn't be jailed, couldn't be evaded.

Leaving Pat where he was, I climbed downstairs again and went to the fridge. Inside were a number of bowls neatly covered with plastic wrap. I found the *sauce piquante* (which *did* smell great) and emptied the chloral hydrate into it, stretched the plastic over it again, and put it back as exactly as I could. Then upstairs to commune with Pat again.

I asked him, Is Bodeau smart?

Pat said, Not as smart as me.

That was the best news I'd heard in a while. So I said, Well, when he gets back and starts fixing supper, you tell him you got an upset stomach tonight and can you have just something cool, like fruit or something. *Don't eat the sauce piquante.*

Then I got the hell out. I went back to my car and drove it back to the highway with the horse farms, parked under a raintree, and went to sleep. Would knockout drops work on a demon? Was the stuff Mamalou had sold me even what she said it was, or had she palmed off some tapwater on me? I didn't know, and in a way I didn't care. If this plan was a washout I'd try something else. I was by God determined that Bodeau wouldn't get to keep his prisoner, even if he did love him and (this was kind of galling) the sex was terrific.

Seeing Pat chained to the wall had pissed me off, you know? That was really uncouth. Even a demon ought to have a sense of, I don't know, common decency.

So about dark I drove back down Sam Boot Road and God, it was scary. That damn tunnel of trees. I mean, trees are all right in their place, but there's some kind of atavistic fear connected with deep, dark woods at night and I was feeling it. I got out and started to walk, and luckily I was wearing Reeboks, but that didn't stop me from falling over stumps and clumps of invisible things that usually had thorns. I walked into trees. The last thing I walked into was the abandoned chicken coop, opening a cut on my forehead. And then I saw a light, and pretty soon I was standing on the edge of the woods looking at the cabin, with a steady white light that I figured was from a gasoline lantern streaming out of one window.

Okay. Time for Leatherstocking. I creep forward very, very slowly. Left foot, right foot, pause, inhale a couple of bugs, left foot, right foot. I creep around the mounds of decaying harrows and things. Something scuffles across my feet, I die a little, I decide it's a possum. Find I actually *have* wet my pants. Tense.

Finally I reach the cabin. Light's pouring out of the one window by the door. I'm standing there, not quite tall enough to see in, when the door opens and Pat yells, Terry! Where the hell are you?

Right here! I say, and he almost goes through the roof.

I slip inside. Bodeau's lying sprawled half across the rustic table,

sleeping noisily. I come up on him, trembling, and by God, he's got three-fingered hands, just like Pat said. The love of my life was not smart enough to think up such an exotic lie. And one brown tooth really did stick up outside Bodeau's mouth. Calling Phyllis Diller! I must have spent a full minute just staring at this bizarre mutation and feeling, maybe for the first time since I realized I was gay, that I belong to the majority after all.

Then Pat touched my shoulder and I came out of my trance. He was decently attired in jeans, T-shirt, and loafers. Obviously Bodeau only kept him chained and naked when he went out. Looking at my beauty I felt the first quiver of sympathy for Bodeau, obsessed with love or at any rate desire for this kid from the Projects. And look where it had gotten him!

Well, I didn't have any more time for introspection, so I said, Where's the gasoline he uses for this lamp? Pat brought it for me, the usual red can with a gooseneck, and I poured it all over Bodeau and the table. Pushing Pat ahead of me, I retreated to the door, holding the lantern, and then, swinging it over my head I smashed it down in the floor next to Bodeau. The flame hesitated for an instant — we were outside by now — and then it went *whump* and a blast of hot wind struck us from behind and pushed us onward. An instant later, as we were running across the clearing by the fire's growing light, the window burst and the glass tinkled.

We stopped at the edge of the woods. It was a great bonfire, shooting up, engulfing the old dry wood of the cabin and lighting up the trees. The roar sounded like Bodeau coming for Pat. I caught sight of the same old owl, or another one, blundering away from the light. The cabin was gone in ten minutes and as it collapsed I could see that something at the heart of the fire was burning not red or yellow but white. Bodeau was burning, burning I hoped to nothing. Even twenty yards away the heat was intense. I saw the grass catch fire. The hummingbird feeder was gone and the wild azaleas looked like big burnt matchsticks. Nearby trees were beginning to catch in a crown fire.

I hustled Pat back along the track, found Sam Boot Road, and bundled him into my car. Neither one of us stopped shaking until we had passed the tollgate plaza and were back on the World's Longest Bridge, with New Orleans glowing ahead, just over the horizon.

The wine was all gone. The rain had decreased to a mere sullen pitpat outside. I was drunk but still coherent, enthralled by the tale but, well, a

mite dubious. There were a couple of points I definitely wanted to clear up before Terry left.

"First," I said, enumerating on my fingers, "was anything left of Bodeau when the fire was investigated, as I assume it was?"

"Nothing. Not a bone, not a tooth. Whatever he was made of, it burned real hot and nothing was left, just like Mamalou had said. In fact, a fugitive warrant was issued for Bodeau on a charge of arson, for causing a minor forest fire. For all I know, they may still be hunting him."

"Okay," I said, going to the next finger, "second. Tell me this. What happened to Pat? Why aren't you living with him at this minute? Why five dogs instead of one guy?"

"I took him to Miami Beach," Terry sighed. "There was a rock concert there by Slash'n'Burn that he just had to attend, so I gave him the money to go while I stayed in the hotel room and watched an old Ingrid Bergman movie. Pat never came back. Later on I heard that he had joined the harem of the band's drummer and was traveling the world as a groupie. Still later I heard that he had disappeared into the sexual underworld of Bangkok, where I'm sure he's surviving, as usual. At any rate, he's finally seeing the world."

"Third," I said, and hesitated. "The girl I was telling you about, Willie. Her name was Wilhelmina, which could also be rendered as Minnie. And her lover, the burglar, he was so dumb and dumbness is sometimes hereditary, whatever Forrest Gump may say, and well — you don't think —"

"No," said Terry, drunkenly positive. "Too much of a coincidence."

"You're right. It's ridiculous."

"Absurd. Look, I didn't mean to get this deep into my sex life and I hope it won't make you lock your door when you see me approach or anything. See you again?"

"You know it. You're the only real friend I have."

Wine talking, of course. Not the sort of truth I'd ever tell while sober, that's for sure. Terry hugged me and I hugged back, awkwardly.

Then Terry was outside, opening a big umbrella like a batwing. The whole Quarter was running water, torrents in the gutters, waterfalls spouting off the rooftops. He hesitated an instant before starting for home.

"You know, I still think about Bodeau sometimes," he said.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah, the poor devil," said Terry, and lurched into the night. ॐ



PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

This Is My Gun, This Is My Pen, Sir!

"Can one be taught to be a book editor or publisher in a few summer weeks?"

— Martin Arnold, "Creating Editors and Publishers," *The New York Times*, July 1, 1999.

THE RAW recruits filed nervously off the bus that had carried them from New York's Port Authority to the secluded camp somewhere in the New Jersey Pine Barrens. A motley group of informally dressed males and females, young and old, they each carried the only items they had been allowed and instructed to bring: a Barnes and Noble canvas bookbag held a copy of Strunk and White, an unabridged dictionary, a calculator, a wireless Palm Pilot with stock-market access capability, a box of red-ink pens, a spare pair of reading glasses, a pack of antacid tablets, and an ergonomic chair cushion.

The empty bus drove off. Clus-

tering like spooked cattle, the recruits looked around the unpeopled grounds for guidance. But the mute barracks and other camp buildings some distance away offered no instructions on how to proceed.

"Maybe this is a test of our initiative," said one recruit.

"No way," said another. "I've heard some vague but scary stories from graduates. Our every minute here will be strictly planned and scheduled. There's no free time or self-direction at all."

"Makes sense," said a third. "After all, they've only got a few weeks to shape us into top-of-the-line editors."

"Well, all I know is that for the money they're charging us, we should have a better reception — jug wine and brie at the very least."

A door slammed, and all heads turned toward the sound. A lone figure had emerged from one of the barracks and now strode with macho determination toward them. As the elegantly suited small man drew

closer, whispers began to circulate among the recruits.

"Is that — ?" "No, it couldn't be." "Yes, I swear it's him."

The man reached a conversational distance and stopped. He superciliously sized up the recruits for a long minute, then spoke in a quiet voice.

"Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Michael Korda."

The huddled men and women visibly relaxed, which was precisely the reaction Korda had been counting on, for he now thrust his face forward aggressively and bellowed.

"BUT YOU MAGGOTS CAN CALL ME GOD! AND GOD'S ONE GOAL FOR THE NEXT THREE WEEKS IS TO TURN YOU PUSILLANIMOUS PUS-BUCKETS INTO EDITORS AT LEAST COMPETENT ENOUGH TO SHINE MAXWELL PERKINS'S SHOES! WHEN I SAY 'REVISE!', YOU'RE GONNA SAY 'HOW MANY CHAPTERS, SIR!' HAVE I MADE MYSELF CLEAR?"

Several people had fainted. All were trembling. One fellow dared to answer with a meek, "Yuh — yes, sir."

"I CAN'T HEAR YOU, WORM!"

"Yes, sir!"

Korda fell back into a normal stance. Clasp ing his hands behind his back, he strode up and down surveying his plebes. When he next spoke, his voice was once again quiet and reserved, exhibiting the patrician tones that had smoothed many a profitable publishing deal and soothed many a queasy author.

"I'm glad we have an understanding. Please realize that I bear you no personal animosity. Your histories and characters mean nothing to me, except insofar as they relate to your nascent editorial skills. I don't care whether you've graduated from an Ivy League school or a community college. As Tennessee Williams often told me, 'A sweet pot of red beans and rice trumps a lousy plate of lobster fra diavolo every time, sugar-honey.' You're all the same raw material in my hands. And since I have very little time in which to mold your impressionable minds, I've found that terror works best. Consequently, your stay here will be punctuated with frequent unpredictable shocks — akin to the hostile buyouts you'll soon be experiencing in the workplace — all calculated to drive my lessons home."

The brave recruit who had previously responded now dared to ask

a question. "Sir, are you the only instructor at the camp?"

"By no means. We'll have a number of visiting lecturers coming in who will assist me in honing your talents. These men and women range the gamut from editors to publishers to distributors to booksellers, from critics and reviewers to literary agents and Hollywood moguls. Each of these experienced experts will share their immense wisdom and knowledge with you —

" — AND YOU'LL SUCK IT ALL DOWN LIKE PIGLETS AT THEIR MAMA'S TEATS AND MAKE IT PART OF YOUR VERY CELLS!"

Once the leaves on the trees had ceased quivering and the sound of shattering window glass had diminished, Korda continued.

"Let me particularize just a few of the visiting editors who have graciously consented to enlighten you.

"We'll hear from Bill Bruford of *The New Yorker*, who'll instruct us in how to manufacture superstar writers out of wet-behind-the-ears, squeaky-voiced, creative-writing graduate students.

"Lecturing us on the niceties of claiming posthumous credit for reconfiguring the stories of deceased authors will be Gordon Lish, who

will never let you forget his tenure at *Esquire*.

"Alice Turner of *Playboy* will explicate the usefulness of cognitive dissonance, concentrating on the juxtaposition of pubic hair to Norman Mailer-magnitude pontifications.

"Tina Brown of *Talk* will advise us about the benefits and pitfalls of Hollywood synergy.

"The legendary Edward Ferman has very kindly agreed to interrupt his retirement to help us understand how his legal adoption of the current editor of *F&SF* has insured the continuation of the Ferman publishing dynasty.

"And Helen Gurley Brown has likewise broken her well-deserved leisure to help us all achieve washboard abs."

Korda paused, then fixed the potential editors with the same adamant gaze that had once made his opponent James Jones capitulate in an arm-wrestling bout at Elaine's that had already stretched on for half an hour. Knees wobbled as they awaited his next words.

"But on a day-to-day basis, I'm the only instructor you'll see regularly. And by regularly I mean IN YOUR FREAKING FACE TWENTY-FOUR-SEVEN! When you awake at four A.M. for your mock

subway commute, I'll be the annoying fellow straphanger who spills coffee on your irreplaceable manuscript. When you pair off and sit down for a pretend three-hour lunch with your most important author, I'll be the lousy waiter who can't get your orders right. When you're eagerly awaiting the dummy sales figures on what you expect will be a bestseller, I'll be the intern who adds or subtracts an extra zero from the numbers. In short, for the next few weeks I'm going to be both your worst, most hated enemy, and your best, most cherished friend. When I'm done with you, you will have gone through the same baptism by fire that once took an editorial lifetime.

"Now, the first order of business is to get you neophytes into

our fully staffed spa and salon for a stylish haircut, followed by a facial, a manicure and a pedicure. After that, you'll each be measured for a tailored power suit. An editor always has to look his or her best. AND RIGHT NOW YOU SLOBS LOOK LIKE A BUNCH OF PUBLICISTS OR SALES REPS! After that, you'll each receive half a dozen 600-page manuscripts which I expect to be line-edited before breakfast."

The recruits made a tentative step or two toward the barracks before being brought up short by Korda's stentorian assault.

"DID I SAY 'DISMISSED' YET, SLIME? NOW, HOLD UP ONE OF YOUR RED MARKERS HIGH, GRAB YOUR CROTCHES, AND REPEAT AFTER ME — !"



Nina Hoffman's next novel, Past the Size of Dreaming (a sequel to A Red Heart of Memories), is due out at the beginning of 2001. Her new story for us is a charming fantasy that calls to mind Ray Davies's lyrics, "Come dancing, it's only natural..."

Night Life

By Nina Kiriki Hoffman

NOTHING ABOVEGROUND tastes so fine as fairy food, and no human man is as beautiful as those who dwell below. No daytime music

sounds so sweet as the music of the fairy ball.

Every night I and my eleven sisters snuck down the secret tunnel beneath my oldest sister's bed. We passed through the grove of silver-leaved trees, and the grove of golden-leaved trees, and the grove of diamond-leaved trees, and then we came to the dance hall, all light and color and music unimaginably beautiful, where our cavaliers waited for us.

I, Marzia, am the youngest, and first went to the dance when I was twelve. I began sleeping in the big room with my sisters when I was eight, and every night my sisters gave me a sleeping posset until they judged me old enough to join them.

For those four years, I, like everyone else in the castle, only knew my sisters did something every night that wore out their slippers. The mystery of it maddened our father.

My first time underground, four different fairy men led me out to

dance, each teaching me more than any of my father's dancing masters ever had. Like my sisters, I wore through the leather soles of my dancing slippers and had to commission a new pair the next morning.

After I had been going belowground four years, I found the one of all of them I wished to dance with. His name was Fern, and I found him among the musicians, which is odd when you think about it; every dancing man I met there was wonderful to talk to, beautiful to look at, excellent to dance with. Yet my eye was drawn to Fern, though he never danced, but always played his lap harp.

Some of the musicians were aboveground folk the fairies had heard and desired because of their skill with instruments, and enticed or kidnapped into the kingdom. Some few were fairies themselves. It seemed the fairy folk lived for pleasure and delight; music-making was too much like work for most of them. I heard it whispered that Fern was half mortal, but that did not dim his beauty a whit.

I watched Fern, and saw that he watched me, even though he never came out from behind his instrument those four years. Finally in a lady's choice dance, I chose him, and he could not refuse me, though his fingers clung to his instrument.

His feet did not know the dance. I took him away from the main chamber to one of the side halls, the one with the crystal stream and the ice statues. We could still hear the music, but few others saw us. There I taught Fern the steps to Riddle the Rose and The Leader Follows.

At first Fern was angry with me for pulling him away from making music, but later, when we had several nights' practice behind us and could dance together, he said, "This is good. This is another way of knowing the music." He pressed a kiss to my forehead.

I thought then that I knew my future. Foolish as I was, I did not watch my sisters, who changed partners a dozen times a night.

Foolish I was not to remember that however dull daytime life was, it still had the power to invade the nights.

We were all twelve nodding over our embroidery frames the next afternoon when my sister Aprilla poked me with her needle hard enough to draw blood.

I jerked awake and looked at her, my needle raised, ready to cross needles with her, but she said, "Hist! I have it from the cobbler's boy that

Father has been searching for a spy again, inviting anyone to come and catch us in our journey. He promises marriage to one of us and half the kingdom to the man who discovers where we go at night."

I tapped Maya on my other side, and whispered the news to her, and she tapped Junia, until we all knew the same thing. Yarnmistress Teazel was sleeping and noticed nothing.

My father had recruited spies before, but we had always defeated them. Usually it was as simple as having whichever of us caught the spy's eye offer him a sleeping posset before we went to bed.

Once or twice a spy resisted, and then Septima practiced an art she had learned from one of her cavaliers, casting confusion or fairy sleep over the spy, and then we went belowground as usual.

At supper that night we were not surprised to see that a strange man sat at our father's right hand. He wore dirt-colored cotton clothes instead of velvet and silk, and his skin was dark with sun. He kept his head down over his food, nodded when Father addressed him, and hesitated over his answers. Unused to speaking with royalty, I thought.

He glanced at me and I saw silver in his eyes.

Fern had just such silvery glints in his eyes.

I trembled and clasped Maya's hand under the table. I feared that this spy would not be easy to evade.

After supper and entertainment, my sisters and I, as usual, retreated to our room upstairs.

"His eyes were for you," Febria told me as we brewed the posset. "So you shall give this to him."

"He will not be tricked," I said. "He is different from the others."

Septima gathered the powdered pearl, fern seed, and pieces of nutshell she would need for her art. "If he will not be tricked, he will be bespelled," she said. "Don't worry."

Presently the stranger came up to the little room beside ours, the one where our father always stationed his spies. It had a door that led to our room, and the lock was on the stranger's side.

I took the posset in a white porcelain cup. Febria sprinkled nutmeg on top. It smelled so lovely I wanted to drink it myself, and remembered the days when I had such a drink every night.

I knocked on the door, and the stranger opened it to me. Ill-mannered,

he stared and stared at me as he had not at supper earlier. "S-something to ease your night," I whispered, holding out the cup to him. What if he found our secret? What if he chose one of us in marriage? Would he choose me? Febria, who knew how to watch for such signs, thought he would.

So I studied this stranger too, in smaller glances. Hard-handed, coarse-haired, narrow-mouthed, I found him. But silver in the eyes, and a smile, when he gave it, that made him beautiful.

"Thank you," he said, taking the cup from me. Finally he stopped staring. He lifted the cup to his lips.

Something clattered to the floor. I glanced toward it. A small knife, sheathed in leather, with an ebony handle. Why had it fallen, and where had it come from?

I looked back at the stranger. "Aah," he said. "Thank you. That was delicious." He held the empty cup out to me and stooped to pick up his knife.

"Sleep well," I whispered. I backed into our bedroom and handed the cup to my waiting sister, listened as the stranger closed and locked the door.

"Did he drink it?" Febria murmured.

"I don't know. It is gone, anyway."

We waited an hour and a half in silence. At the end of that time, Septima worked a charm on the lock and opened the door to the stranger's room. We saw him lying there asleep, snoring. Septima sealed the door again.

"Let's not go tonight," I whispered to the others.

"He sleeps," said Febria. "Where's the harm?"

"He makes fools of us."

But my sisters laughed at my apprehensions, and we all tugged Febria's bed aside. She sketched the sign on the floor that opened our door to the belowground world. I could hear the far-off music already, flute, harp, fiddle, and drum, and smell the fruits that hung always ripe from the trees in the metal- and jewel-leafed orchards, sweeter and juicier than any earthly fruit. The light that shone from the tunnel was the color of sun through spring leaves.

We ran down the steps, laughing. My heart yearned for Fern.

And yet, as I reached the bottom stair, something held up the hem of

my skirt, as though it were caught in a crack. I tugged it loose but could see no trap.

As we crossed the silver-leafed orchard, I heard a tiny crackle behind me, as of a twig breaking.

As we traveled the gold-leafed grove, I heard such a sound again.

As we passed through the diamond-leafed grove, I heard it again.

I looked behind each time, and saw nothing but a waving branch. Since we had all plucked fruit as we passed, there was nothing significant about that.

Then we reached the dance hall and were swept into the heart of the dance. I took joy in the dancing knowledge of my feet, delight in the visions that met my eyes, beautiful and graceful people all around me. I forgot my fears.

Not until I had been at the dance an hour did I approach Fern and coax him away from the musicians' dais. He came more easily that night. We went to the hall of flowers and I taught him *Face the Future*, and *Laugh Lies Bleeding*, and *Over and Under*.

The music stopped and he held me closer and whispered in my ear, "Who is that shadow that follows you?"

All my joy fled. "It is my father's spy. He will tell my father where we go every night, and then he can claim me in marriage, and they will close our door to this world." I saw all the bright fire of music, color, dance, laughter, our cavaliers and their ladies, the tastes of fairy fruit, all I knew of wonder, fall to ash in my mind.

"No," Fern murmured, and kissed me on the lips for the first time. He tasted of sweet grass and sage. "Now I will teach you a dance," he said in a louder voice, "Catch the Rabbit's Toe," and he put his arms around me. We whirled together, arms about each other's waists, and then he loosed me and lunged. A moment later he gripped a black cap in his hands, and my father's spy stood unveiled before us.

"Who are you?" Fern asked him.

"Prewitt, a huntsman, my lord," said the spy in a shaking voice.

Fern studied the cap he had taken from the spy. "A cap of invisibility, such as only Mist makes. Where did you get it?"

The spy had leaves from the orchard trees sticking out of the wallet on the belt at his waist. He looked confused and frightened. "An old

woman in the marketplace gave it to me," he said. "She vowed 't'would help me catch the princesses and earn my fortune."

"What did she ask in return?"

"She asked nothing, but gave it to me in thanks for three coppers I gave her. She was begging."

"So it is rightfully bought," Fern said. He sighed. "Someone did this mischief a-purpose, then. Is it my Marzia whose hand you would ask in marriage?"

A small thrill went through me then. My heart had already claimed Fern, but this was the first I knew that his claimed me in return.

Prewitt said, "I find her most comely, my lord, but all of the princesses are beautiful; I would be happy with any. Though I know them not."

Fern thought for a moment, silver flashing in his eyes. At last he turned to my father's spy and said, "Let us contrive."

The following morning our father summoned us before him and confronted us with his spy.

"My daughters, where do you go each night?" our father asked us.

We all answered, "Nowhere, father, but to our room and our rest."

"That is not true, is it, my spy?" our father asked.

"It is not true. I have seen where they go," said the spy. "They go to the underground kingdom."

All my sisters gasped.

"They pass through a grove of silver-leafed trees." He took leaves of silver from his wallet. "They pass through a grove of gold-leafed trees." He brought out leaves of gold. "They pass through a grove of diamond-leafed trees." He added leaves of diamond to the bouquet he held. "And then they come to the fairy ballroom, and there they dance their slippers through each night."

All my sisters paled as he spoke. Only Maya looked at me and noticed I was not surprised.

"At last a man who can do as I ask," the king said. "Thank you for unearthing this mystery. Now at last we can put a stop to this wild behavior and teach these girls to be fit wives for mortal men. Choose any of my daughters as your wife, and I will grant you half my kingdom."

"Marzia is the one I want," said the spy.

I went to him and we were wed then and there. It was Fern's walnut-stained hand I held, Fern who wore Prewitt's coarse clothes in front of my father, Fern who gave me my second kiss, my first as a married woman.

Fern it was who told my father's workmen how to close the tunnel under Febria's bed that led to the underground, and Fern it was before we left the castle who opened another tunnel under Maya's bed and gave all my sisters fairy shoes that would never wear through no matter how hard they danced.

Prewitt stayed belowground and learned to dance from the fairy women. Each night he danced with a different one of my sisters, and each day he ran with the fairy huntsmen after beasts beyond legend. After a while he married my sister Maya, and by that time he had learned all he needed to know of courtliness; they spent half their time aboveground and half below.

Fern built me a castle on a hill in our half of the kingdom, and opened a door to underground there too. I saw my sisters every night, except on nights we entertained. Fern invited wandering bards and harpers to our great hall and played with the best of them. Some of them went willingly underground. Others taught him new music to take there. I learned to play the lute, and taught Fern Tickle the Baby and Patch the Roof, and we were very happy.



J. R. Dunn is best known for his hard-edged science fiction novels, This Side of Judgment, Days of Cain, and Full Tide of Night. His occasional short stories also tend to look at life today and tomorrow without flinching, as is true of this tough tale of a future that might be closer than we like to think.

Arcadia

By J. R. Dunn

Wednesday, May 17 —

"...estimates of up to a billion dead...aid teams in Bombay report that deaths now exceed ten thousand per day...In Washington, officials refuse to comment on rumors that the Plague is of artificial origin. Several prominent gentechs, however, have told CNS that certain aspects of the disease, particularly its tendency to strike majority victims, seems to imply...."

CAREFULLY PUSHING ASIDE a crocus stalk, Barb yanked out a clump of weeds. She tossed them onto the flagstone walk and settled back on her heels.

It was a warm day, the sun blazing from a dappled sky. Greenhouse weather, they called it. She heard a ratcheting sound and looked up. Another plane. Not a jet this time — one of those helicopter things. An Osprey.

She wiped her forehead and got back to work. The garden was in pitiful shape. She'd been neglecting it since the news turned so hideous.

It needed a lot of attention; she planted nothing gengineered or artificial. It was a utopia for pests and weeds.

She ought to concentrate on the truck garden. Ian had told her supplies were running low in town. Stores closed, the streets nearly empty. He was there now, seeing what he could scrape up.

A ringing came from the house. Barb gritted her teeth. Somebody had overridden her message. She'd made it clear: no calls, no news. She needed space for a while.

All the same, she got up and rushed to the house. It might be Howard....

But it was only Myra. "Did you *hear*?" she brayed, going on to quote something from the news, her tone almost gleeful. Barb held back a sigh. She might have guessed. Myra had always been the problem child of the group. Look at her now: eyes red, short hair a mess, cigarette in one hand. Barb focused on the burning coal. She'd thought Myra had kicked that habit. How you could call yourself a Green and still smoke Barb didn't know.

A word caught her attention. "What? Biotech?"

"So you weren't watching." Myra's eyes narrowed as she bent closer to the screen. "They're claiming it's artificial. That the plague is gengineered. As if they don't know what's really going on."

A chill gripped Barb and she looked away, seeing again the children in India, faces bloated and black, the refugee camps on the Mexican border, the piles of corpses everywhere. She forced her eyes back to the screen. "What did...?"

But Myra was off and running. "Who they trying to kid? We've exceeded the planet's carrying capacity, and now the balance is being restored. Simple as that. The biosphere strikes back and what do they do? Kick off a witchhunt. It's disgusting." She lit another cigarette from the first. "They're up to something, Barb. We should have a meeting."

"Let's hold off on that," Barb said quickly. She didn't want to face the group on her own. The last meeting's tone had been very ugly — Beth and Roger virtually gloating, as if the important thing about the dieoff was their predictions coming true. Barb didn't like that. A cleansing might be necessary, but it was nothing to celebrate. Those were people dying out there, not "debased protoplasm." In Howard's absence the group's moral compass was swinging wildly.

The group was the National Environmental Coordinating Committee, a coalition of a dozen small environmental outfits founded by Howard Davies ten years ago after he realized that the national organizations had become bloated, ineffectual bureaucracies. The idea was to avoid the same fate by remaining loose, informal, and adaptable — “amateurs of the Earth,” as their mission statement said. The committee spanned the gamut of the moderate environmental movement: feminist, Christian, Wise Use, everything but off-the-wall radicals like the Khmer Vert and Red Harvest. The point was to persuade CEOs and politicians, not assassinate them.

They were a diverse and wild lot all the same. Myra was a professor of feminist ecology at UCLA. She had her own little gang of students down there, and the committee gave her a lot more clout than she'd have otherwise. Then there was Gaia-worshipping Beth, and Brad the priest, and Ray the Fullerite....

But Howard above all. Their center, their shaman, their pope, the Earth's Tribune, as Padre Brad put it. He could have been another Broward, another Commoner, even another Nader, but he'd turned his back on all that. Howard valued results. He had no desire to become one more media prince. Barb thought of him as a saint, though he'd have laughed to hear it.

“Barb....” Myra bent close to the screen. “Barb, you listening? We're an *action* committee, right? We've got to formulate a response.”

A response? Barb stole a glance at the holo set across the room. A half-billion dead — and that was yesterday morning, the last time she'd been able to endure watching. How do you respond to such a thing? She turned back to Myra. As if under compulsion, she opened her mouth to ask exactly that.

She was saved by a rumble from overhead. She raised her eyes and sighed. As the roar faded she saw Myra bent as if trying to peer through Barb's ceiling. “What's that noise?”

“They've opened an old airfield off the Sound to send supplies to Asia. They fly over all day. Jumbo jets.”

“Won't do any good.”

At least it's something, Barb thought. But again she saw the mass graves, the corpses in numbers so vast it seemed the Earth would reject them. No, it wouldn't do any good.

"Same here," Myra said. "Helicopters. Those big green army ones." Her voice grew quiet. "There was shooting last night. And smoke over L.A. Looked like it was coming from Compton. I'm...taking the kids into town tomorrow. To where the army is. Just to witness, you know?"

"Be careful."

Myra nodded. "Sure. But if we don't act, who will?"

Smiling a goodbye, Barbara regarded the blank screen, thinking again of shutting off the phone until this was all over. But the group might need her, and Howard was due back from Reykjavik any time....

She hit the macro key and waited, chewing her thumbnail. He still wasn't home. His broad face smiled at her, glasses gleaming. "...leave a message." He winked. "Green thoughts."

Barb hung up. She'd already left three messages.

She got up and paced the room. It was wide and spacious, its big windows opening out to the trees. The walls were closely fitted logs. They'd had problems with insects hatching out of the raw wood at first but it was worth it. Everything was natural, every item green: a solar stone reservoir system for heating, panels on the roof....

And a boiler, and a powerline hookup. Northwest Washington wasn't prime territory for solar energy. She sighed. Was it possible to live both purely and well at the same time? She wondered if she'd ever know for sure.

But she loved it here all the same. The quiet, the forest, the wildlife. A hoot owl lived in the woods, just yards away. She shivered when she heard it at night.

Her gaze fell on the holo projector. She bit her lip. The news fascinated as much as it horrified, and she ought to pay attention to what was happening. To witness, as Myra had said.

Wringing her hands, she told the projector to switch on.

She kept her eyes averted until she was sure it wasn't showing something horrible. A voice spoke, serious and slow. Two figures floated in the center of the room, one-third life-size, masking the furniture beyond them. A man in uniform, talking to a reporter. The dateline read St. Louis.

"...well sir, we're not here to shoot anybody. We're here to keep order and that's it."

The reporter asked another question, his voice drowned out by some kind of tank behind him.

"Genocide? Look, I don't wanna hear that. Those medics are going in to assist..."

Barb stepped past the holo, arm high as if to avoid striking the dwarfed images. She paused at the window. Rain had come, the damp Northwestern spring reasserting its hold. Another jet roared by, hidden in the overcast. She raised a hand as if to pull it from the sky, gripping the curtain until it passed. Behind her a network voice spoke, deep and soothing.

A whine announced Ian's return in the runabout. A moment later she heard him cough. His TB had gotten worse since all this had started. She shut off the set and went to meet him.

Thursday, May 18 —

"...rioters destroyed the UNESCO camp at Khartoum today. No word on relief workers...Mexico City is still burning. The US embassy reports complete breakdown...the Senate Biotech Committee has demanded that the Administration comment on reports that the plague is a manmade...."

THE CHILDREN were dark, and very thin except for rounded bellies and grotesque swellings at the throat. The cheerful colors of their rags were blotted and smudged. They staggered toward the camera on bird legs, obscure shadows behind them.

The boy fell, eyes open wide. Turning to him, the girl pulled at his arm, nearly dropping to her knees at the effort. She let it go and faced the camera once more, stumbling on with her head raised to the sky.

Barb switched off the set and sat tightly hugging herself.

She recalled other footage, from Ethiopia, Somalia, Bangladesh. This was different. Back then there had been hope, some small chance of lessening the misery. But now...

Images like that had set her on her path years ago, and images like that were her tools, her stock in trade as a filmmaker specializing in environmental fictomentaries. A successful one, too: critics considered her films equal to *Koyaanisquatsi* and *Baraka*, and they were regularly scheduled

on the public stations, not to mention selling well on video. Along with Howard, Barb was considered one of the people most responsible for keeping environmentalism in the media spotlight after the population explosion fizzled and it was discovered — or claimed, at any rate — that global warming had curtailed a new ice age during the past century. She'd released four hour-plus features and the same number of shorts — her Gaia pieces, displaying nature in its perfection, as if man's ravages had never taken place. She'd been nominated for two Emmys but hadn't won. A conspiracy, Myra insisted.

It didn't matter. The name Barbara Holdon-Nordhoff meant something that establishment prizes couldn't add or take away from. Her mail told her as much. A day didn't go by without a dozen postings from people touched by her work. The more mystical types even meditated to them.

Still, she often felt guilty about not being on the front lines, even though Howard said that she was worth ten environmental action committees by herself. He particularly liked *Et in Arcadia Ego*, a film she felt ambiguous about, almost regretted making, in fact. A short, ten-minute takeoff on nature shows: Barb walking through a rain forest, dressed in a white robe like Mother Gaia herself, hair long and flowing, pointing out and explaining various species.

Then a crackling sound, barely audible, and screams from the wildlife. And smoke, and flame, a wall of fire tearing through the foliage, touching Barb herself, her hair blazing torchlike, skin melting off her bones until nothing but a skeleton remained, still robed, still talking, finally walking through ashes with a hand raised to the camera.

It was meant for holo format, flame filling the room, Death Herself welcoming the viewer to Hell. A lot of people said it was her best, but Barb no longer cared for it. She'd made it in a frenzy of anger after hearing the greenhouse warming report, in only three days. Anger didn't solve anything.

She frowned, hearing Ian cough in the other room. It occurred to her that he might run out of his pills if things got any worse. Of course, it was his own fault, hopping into the sack with that Carioca bitch at the Rio film festival. Taking advantage of Barb's packed schedule for a little oval office action. Striking back, if truth be known, for the way her career had taken off. It was Ian Nordhoff who had the NYU film degree, after all, not little Barb, fooling with her vid programs on the sun porch.

And then he had to tell her about it! His damned honesty — at least that was what *he* called it.

She heard footsteps and stiffened as Ian entered the room.

Walking over, he enfolded her in his arms. She winced despite herself. He released her and left, every movement harsh with reproach.

She squeezed her eyes shut. They'd barely touched since Rio. Sleeping apart until he got better, they told each other. It was a new strain, they didn't know how long it would be.... Not that sex had been any good before that. Since the child, the procedure.... You'd think he'd gone through it, the way he went on.

Gathering the hem of her robe — she'd lacked the energy to dress this morning — she started to get up. Then Ian made a retching noise. Her stomach knotted and she plopped back into the seat, overcome with anger and disgust.

What was the matter with her? She'd forgiven him, hadn't she? They were adults. This was the 21st century. And besides, the Brazilian woman was probably dead by now. Not that she'd been the first, not by any means....

She wished Howard was back. She needed his strength, his steadiness, his cool, deep mind. He'd make sense of this horror. She wouldn't be so afraid.

The conference — a meeting of international environmental ministers — had ended last week, but with all the chaos she wasn't surprised he was still in Iceland. She'd noticed a lot of the planes flying into the airfield were civilian passenger models. Requisitioned for the emergency, she supposed. Howard might be stranded up there.

She decided not to dwell on that. Wiping her eyes with the hem of the robe, she got up. Without thinking she turned on the holo.

A pile of bodies lay sprawled before her, hundreds of dark bodies and faces. Mute with shock, she thought of the child staggering toward the camera.

A hose sprayed across the pile. She watched without comprehension as the stream shut off and a spark flew from outside the screen.

Stifling a scream, she swung away as the mound burst into flame. In the other room Ian cleared his throat.

...

Saturday, May 20 —

"The story so far: in late March Nigerian police apprehended an American carrying vials of what appeared to be water. He was released after no drugs were found. Last week Dr. Milton Otohe of the government health service conducted further tests, discovering dead plague bacilli. U.S. Delta Force troops, fighting their way into Lagos, have recovered the vials along with a report by the late Dr. Otohe. In a few minutes the President is scheduled to address a joint session of congress...."

"They've arrested Howard."

Myra stared unblinking from the screen, her voice so harsh that Barb needed a moment to grasp what she'd said. When she did she nearly dropped the armload of mason jars she'd been cleaning when the phone rang. Controlling them took all her attention. The best answer she could come up with was, "What?"

Myra nodded fiercely. "Two days ago. Soon as he stepped off the plane. We've got a CIA center on campus and one of my kids does data-entry for them. I got suspicious when I heard that story this morning and talked her into accessing. He's being held in Washington."

Barb didn't need to ask what story that was. She'd seen it herself. They had evidence now. The plague was artificial. Somebody had created it, and cultivated it, and harvested it, before traveling the Earth to scatter it wide. Johnny Deathseed.

She found her voice at last. "For what? They can't just *grab* somebody...."

"Oh, Barb, grow up." Myra's eyes narrowed. "They can do anything they want. It's the crackdown. Things are going splat and they need scapegoats." Myra winced at a popping in the background. Barb realized it must be gunfire. "You've got to do something, Barb."

"Me?" The jars clanked loudly.

"Barb, for godsake, put those down.... Yes, you. You've got a name, Missy. We don't. You're somebody. People will talk to you." She reached for her keyboard. "There. Numbers for the FBI, Justice, Senator Forbes...call them and get back to me."

She must have seen something in Barb's face. "What's the matter? Afraid? Listen, sweetie, we've been in the trenches while you were

making pretty pictures. I've been busted more than my share. We all have. You owe us this."

She dropped her eyes. "I'm sorry, Barb. I didn't mean that. It's just..." Her voice thickened. "I'm really upset. Things are getting scary."

Barb touched the screen. "Myra, don't. It's all right. Get centered, huh? I'll make the calls. I was a little shocked, that's all."

After Myra rang off Barb sat for a minute before bringing up the list. It took a half-dozen tries to get through to FBI headquarters. She was finally answered by a harassed-looking girl with a shock of hair hanging over her face. She listened for a moment then broke in. "I'll take your number and have a..."

"You don't understand," Barb said calmly. "I need to speak to someone in charge *now*."

"Ma'am, I just answer the phone. Nobody's available...."

"There has to be somebody. Now put me on hold...."

"What cave you been living in, sister?" The girl glared at her. "Don't you watch the news? I'm telling you, they're all out."

"Fine," Barb said. "Here's the number. But I'm registering a complaint when they call back."

The girl's face screwed up in an expression Barb thought was rage until she spoke. "You go right ahead. My husband died last week. The plague got him." She thrust her face toward the screen. "You know where the staff is? They're out hunting down those biotechs. I hope they shoot every fucking one."

Barb gazed at the dark screen before trying the next number. She did no better with that one, or the one after it. A lot of the people who answered were wearing military fatigues. She weighed the idea of a coup, some Pentagon clique taking advantage of the disaster, but dismissed the thought. The soldiers were simply replacing absent workers. Government positions were reserved for majority applicants. Many of them would be sick or dying now.

That was the news Myra hadn't mentioned. The plague was tailored to infect minority — she bit her lip — majority victims. It made sense. The Third World still had population problems. They were the ones insisting on industrializing, on abusing resources, burning the rain forests, pumping greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere, making the same mistakes as

the developed nations despite clear warnings. She'd heard it often, from the group and elsewhere. From Howard, too. She tried to recall when he'd started talking that way. Two years ago? Three?

She tried another number but after that her will faltered and she set the rest aside. Switching on the holo, she sat with her back to it, listening to the voices and sounds, her mind choking with imagery of bodies, of flames. She waited until it grew unbearable before turning to look.

A city was ablaze. The dateline said NEWARK-LIVE. She switched channels. The officer she'd seen interviewed the other day yelled into a headset. His shoulder was bandaged and blood stained his uniform.

The National Guard had fired into a mob of refugees marching on El Paso. The President was on his way to Camp David following his speech to Congress. The cabinet and joint chiefs were meeting him there. St. Louis, Detroit, and southside Chicago were blockaded. American embassies burned all across the planet. An airliner had been blown out of the sky above Pakistan.

One channel displayed a street, cockeyed, as if the camera had fallen. An arm lay foreshortened by the lens, stiff and unmoving. Indistinct shapes flitted beyond it.

Barb leaned forward. "Save that," she whispered.

She surfed channels for another hour. There was nothing about Howard.

Monday, May 22 —

"...the U.N. General Assembly. Modifications to the plague bacillus include a dramatically shortened incubation period and, ironically, a lowered death rate to ensure its spread...mechanism for infecting non-whites alone is uncertain. There has been speculation about melanin levels but some scientists believe that a genetic marker...after the presentation, Ambassador Horne was assaulted by several delegates. U.N. security forces intervened...."

Barb was viewing recordings of Howard's speeches when the monitor buzzed and a line appeared stating that her passport had been suspended. She blinked at it and moved to switch to phone mode but let her hand drop. It was pointless; no government offices were answering at all now.

She deleted the notice. Howard's frozen image returned to life. He'd given a lot of speeches in the past decade, to anyone who'd listen. Barb had quite a few on file — she'd been thinking about a film on Howard's career.

But she wasn't concerned with that now. She was looking for particular lines and phrases, words that held a certain freight of meaning....

She sat up. Howard speaking at...Dufresne, four years ago.

Someone had just asked a question.

"...in a real sense, humanity is a tumor on the universe. It behaves exactly as a cancer does, expanding, metastasizing, destroying its host. We, as individuals, are aberrant cells. And we know what surgeons do with tumors...."

She closed her eyes. Howard had smiled as he spoke. Smiled. She wondered what he'd been thinking at that moment. Where the words had come from, what the intention had been. An offhand phrase, a metaphor not thought through, sheer hyperbole? And who had asked; some kid, curious or wanting to make his presence known, or someone else, a biotech major, perhaps, specializing in bacterial mod?

He'd never said anything like that to her. Never. She was sure of that. Or like the others she'd found: "Life itself is a pathological symptom," "No more than a hundred million people are necessary on this planet," "Most so-called human beings are products of junk genes — living, walking, breathing introns."

Someone asked another question. "Block and save," Barb whispered. The monitor queried her. She repeated the words, louder this time. The image froze: Howard, hair uncombed, in his trademark black suit and work shirt.

The door banged open. She jerked upright, hand at her throat. Ian stood panting, his face pale. As he leaned against the jamb she thought of how silly he looked in khaki shorts.

"The road..." he gasped, then started coughing.

Barb got up. "What is it?"

"A car." He ran his fingers through his beard. "In the driveway..."

He collapsed on the couch. Barb hovered over him, asking if he was all right. He went into another fit of coughing. She got him a glass of water and one of his pills, glancing out the front window as she came back, seeing nothing unusual.

Ian's hacking subsided but he still couldn't get many words out. Just a car, at the end of the drive, people dying.

She left him to rest and went to the front door. It was drizzling, soft, misty waves of damp settling rather than falling on the lawn and brush. She could just make out the back of a car through the bushes at the end of the driveway. Hesitantly she stepped off the porch.

Halfway down the drive she heard sobbing and beneath it another sound that resolved into slurred mutters. She halted, reluctant to go on, then thought of Ian, so utterly overwhelmed. Well, she'd wanted a sensitive man, hadn't she? She forced the next few steps.

It was a station wagon, the rear crammed with bags and suitcases, gas cans tied to the roof. No one was in sight, either outside the car or through the windows. She inched forward until the open driver's door came into view.

Someone was bent over the top of the seat, shoulders shaking, head in hands. Beneath him, in the driver's seat, a man lay cradled behind the wheel, a large black man, the kind that looked so scary on the street at night. His neck was swollen and he held his head as if he was in pain. He was the one talking to himself.

A woman lay in the passenger seat. A piece of cloth covered her face. In her arms rested a little girl. The child did not move.

Barb made a sound. The man's eyes went wide and he fumbled for something under his shirttail. A pistol escaped his fingers and clattered to the floor.

The young man in back swung to face her, eyes enormous behind wire-rimmed glasses. He stared at Barbara wordlessly.

"Sorry, miss," the older man whispered. He smiled, lips barely parting. She saw black spots against the brown of his face.

She lifted her hands, palms outward. The man grunted. "It bad, huh." Behind him a sob tore from his son's throat.

"Yeah," the man said. He was fading. His eyelids drooped and he whispered, "Lord, lord...."

Barb could almost feel the effort it cost him to pull himself back. "You do me one favor," he said. "Take care my boy. He ain't sick, I promise you."

She bobbed her head, unable to speak.

The eyes closed. "Neil," he said, louder than Barb would have thought possible. "You go with this lady."

"No." The word was muffled against the back seat.

"Neil. You mind me now. Get out this car."

The boy fumbled with the handle and pushed the door open. Barb retreated while he got out and went to his father. The man's arm lifted once, dropped back. He whispered a moment or two before waving his son away.

Hands clenched, Barb approached the door once again. "Can...can I get you anything?"

"No...leave me my wife, you please." His eyes had gone blank, and she was uncertain whether he was truly aware of her anymore. "God bless you," he mumbled when she started off.

Neil sobbed brokenly as they walked to the house. He was about fifteen, dressed in a T-shirt and a pair of army pants. Barb walked behind him, rubbing her face. She'd never seen grief this deep before and didn't know quite how to respond.

Ian had gone off somewhere, probably upstairs to rest. She sat Neil down on the sofa, explaining that she'd call someone about his family. He spoke for the first time then: "Nobody to call."

He refused a soda, something to eat, a tranquilizer. Barb went upstairs to tell Ian what had happened. He lay in bed, a damp cloth on his forehead. He frowned as if mulling things through, then went downstairs. Barb listened as he spoke to Neil. He got no answer and after a minute came out and gave her a shrug.

She was pacing the living room, biting at a knuckle and wondering what to do when the phone rang. As she answered it she saw Neil sitting in the same spot as before, his glasses off, staring into the distance.

It was Myra. "We had a meeting this morning," she said calmly. "I decided not to tell you."

"Myra, I can't..."

A finger rose, foreshortened by the screen. "But you should have been there. Only five of us, couldn't reach the rest. That was enough. Lori — that little bitch — started in about how cold and cruel we are, as if we cooked the damned bug up ourselves. The padre, he wanted to talk about souls. Immortal souls, can you believe it?"

"Myra..."

"...said he'd pray for us all. Nobody cares about Howard." She grabbed a sheaf of papers and shook it at Barb. "They've picked up a lot of others. I've got a list..."

"Myra, please!"

Dropping the sheets, Myra stared at Barb. A rumble sounded in the background and she clutched the edge of her desk.

"I can't talk now," Barb said. "I'll have to call back."

Myra's mouth twisted and she seemed about to go on, but she simply nodded. "Okay. Why not?"

As the screen faded, her eyes remained fixed on Barb's.

Glancing at Neil, Barb saw that he hadn't moved.

Night was falling. She heated some soup and brought it to Neil. He said nothing when she set it down. Ian didn't feel hungry either.

She watched darkness fill the living room. Outside the owl hooted. She wondered if the man in the car had died yet. Driving the thought away only made room for worse. She kept seeing that mound of bodies, herself atop it, enveloped in flames, walking across figures that squirmed, and wriggled, and clutched at her white and flawless robe. After a time she realized she was talking to herself, a poem of debased protoplasm, of human cancers. She bit her lip until she tasted blood.

Finally she got up and walked to the bright rectangle of the study doorway. The bowl was untouched, and Neil gave no sign that he was aware of her. She got him a blanket and pillow and went to bed.

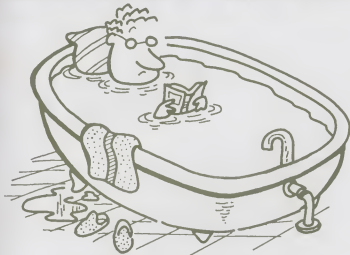
She couldn't sleep, and hours later she heard cries from the first floor. At first she closed her ears to them but they didn't taper off so she got up and descended the stairs. The study was dark, and she paused before turning on the light.

Neil was wrapped in the blanket, moving beneath it as if struggling. When the light hit him he froze, then jerked upright, regarding her through sleep-fogged eyes. "You did this!" he shrieked. His arm lifted as if to gesture at something unseen. "You whiteys! It's you fuckers! You killin' us all!"

His mouth was twisted in a rictus of hatred, but she sensed something else too: a kind of pleading, a longing of some sort.

And she might have answered it, if she hadn't lived for years over the

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And those aren't my hands."

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net, if she hadn't married a man who presented no challenge to her isolation, if she didn't truly believe that most of her kind were walking tumors.

But all those things were true, and so she shut off the light, and turned away, and in the morning he was gone.

Wednesday, May 24 —

"...Japanese space station Kaga has reported nuclear strikes in Hindustan and Northern China...no word from U.S. orbital installations...the White House refuses to...at least forty explosions in Manchuria, sixty or more... unconfirmed report that the NORAD laser network has been activated, against what target is un..."

THE MONITOR was set on workstation. Barb bent close, splicing in digital footage. She called up a shot of a woman hanging head down from a burning apartment building. That one would work.

She glanced at the time bar. An hour and a half of film already, and a lot more to fit in. It would have to be cut. But that was how you did it — throw everything in and then chop to the bone. Filmmaking was editing, after all.

Behind her the anchor nattered on about how ferret satellites had detected preparations for an Asian nuclear strike. There was no footage. If they had footage it might mean something.

Sobbing cut through the voiceover. Barb turned to look. The anchorwoman, Jessica something, had buried her head in her hands. Her partner, Barret, half-rose, then faced the camera. "We'll take a break now."

The camera crew was a little slow and several seconds passed before the fadeout came. Barb studied the logo. "CNS — the Nation's Central Nervous System." She turned back to the monitor.

She found a good place for the hanging footage and spliced it in. A new voice came from the holo. Looking over, she saw an orbital shot of an area she didn't recognize, a lot of cloud and ocean. Abrupt pinpoints of light appeared near the Earth's limb. "Save that," she shouted.

She swung away, rubbing her arms. She was exhausted; she hadn't slept since that kid left. She didn't know that she'd ever sleep again. There were too many people sleeping now.

The phone rang and she lunged for the key. The monitor went blank. Barb stared at it in disappointment. She'd had Howard's number on perpetual ring for two days now.

"Barb," a voice said. "Barb, it's Myra."

"There's no visual."

"I'm not calling from home. I'm at a booth. My phone's out. I don't know why."

Barb blinked at the screen. "Barb, are you there?"

"Yes, I'm here. Stay centered, Myra."

"It's all out of control. I never thought anything could be this bad. They shot a man down the street. He's lying there...."

"Who?"

"The cops! The cops shot him. They just executed him! And Barb, some of the kids wanted to go into town today. I told them not to but they did anyway. A demo against the attack. They went this morning." Myra's voice grew throaty. "And they didn't come back."

"Myra..."

"...nothing but flames downtown. The helicopters are firing into it. I can see them."

"Myra, listen." The line fell silent. "I sympathize with what you're going through. I feel your confusion. Now, you might consider..."

"Oh, my God."

"...go home, and sit down, and find a clear spot..."

"There's men down the street."

"...get your mind off things. When Howard comes back, we'll..."

"They've got guns, Barb."

Barb shook her head. "What?"

"They're coming this way."

"Myra, maybe you'd better..."

The phone clattered. Barb listened for another minute. Shouts, and footsteps, and a rising wail that it took her a moment to realize was emerging from her own throat.

She broke contact. The screen glared blackly at her. The holo was rerunning the strike footage. She had nearly gotten her shaking under control when she heard a sound from upstairs.

She didn't want to see Ian now. He'd come to her last night, as she lay

awake, and climbed in next to her, weeping silently. She'd remained still, overcome with disgust, unable to banish the image of him in the arms of that dead woman. After a while he went away.

She couldn't face him; not tonight she couldn't. Padding to the door she flung it open and stepped out. The night was quiet, the moon large and full. Off in the woods the owl cried. There was a flash overhead. She looked up: a meteor, nothing more. There were a lot of them this time of year.

She breathed deeply. The air was cool and pure. With her eyes on the stars she circled to the front of the house. The gravel of the drive crackled like frost. Stepping onto the grass, she brushed small pieces off her bare feet.

She was only half-aware of approaching the road, the car. A snatch of dream returned: the man holding his pistol, stern and unforgiving. "You did this." But no, Neil had said that. The man was dead now too, wasn't he?

A sound from down the drive caught her ear. She went toward it. The rear of the car glowed in the moonlight. She stopped and called out.

Another noise, as if someone was moving. She stepped closer. A roaring grew in the distance. She halted again. "Who's there?" She sensed movement inside the car. "Neil...?" The rumble drowned out her voice.

Without thinking she grabbed a handful of gravel and threw it. The stones clattered against a gas can. She took another step.

Something low and sleek raced into the brush. The stench hit her the same moment she caught sight of the thing in the seat. Bloated and pulpy, its obscene bulk seeming to quiver in the darkness. *Take care my boy*, she heard him say, as clearly as the moaning engines. She stumbled backward, arms wide to save her balance. The noise surged as lights swept above the forest. Hands to her ears, she ran back to the house. She couldn't tell if she was screaming or not.

She awoke in front of a blank monitor. The news was still on, and for a moment she thought that had roused her until she heard knocking.

The image of the thing in the car rose up. It had moved as she faced it last night, she would swear to that, like the people in the holograms, never dying, rising to suffer again....

The knocking resumed. Whimpering, she got up and went to the hall. Someone stood outside, a small person. Neil....

But the figure swung round and she saw it was a soldier, a woman in helmet and camo gear.

They knocked again as she reached for the knob. There was no doorbell; that was a waste of copper. She opened the door a crack and peered out. An officer faced her, looking to be no more than a teenager. As he touched the brim of his cap the woman stepped beside him. She held a handcomp that she tapped once.

"Ma'am, we just stopped by to see things are okay," the young officer said. He waited a minute, then touched his tongue to his teeth. "Well, they are, aren't they?"

Barb jerked her head silently. He eyed her up and down before shooting a glance at his partner, who returned it uneasily and set a hand on her holster.

The officer went through a series of ambiguous hand gestures. Barb stared uncomprehendingly then raised her eyes. "Things are fine."

He studied her a moment longer. "Good enough. Lots of nasty stuff happening, believe me." He took off his cap and scratched his scalp. "Okay. We got an APC up the road about half mile. Just keeping an eye open, no trouble. Any problem, anything you need, give a holler. And here." He pulled a pamphlet from his web belt. "No heavy fallout expected from...you know. But if there is, this'll tell you what to do."

She took the booklet without a word. The soldier replaced his cap. "Afternoon..."

"Jack," the woman said. "The car."

"Oh yeah. There's a car down the end of your drive. Don't know if you noticed. We'll get somebody to take it away, but, uh, it'd be best not to go down there, okay?"

Jerking the door wider, Barb looked past his shoulder. She couldn't see it from here. "When?" she said.

The man frowned. "Ma'am?"

"You have to take it away now. You have a tank up there. You can push it. Tell your commander to do it now! Today! Push it into the woods. I don't want him around here...."

"Oh, God — she saw them," the girl muttered. The officer stared at Barb wide-eyed. "Uhh...scuse me, Ma'am..."

"Don't call me *ma'am*. Nobody calls me *ma'am*."

His partner touched his arm. "Hey, it's all right," she told Barbara. "We'll take care of it. Tomorrow it'll be gone, I promise. Don't look outside till then, that's all."

"I want it out of here," Barb insisted. The girl paused, as if uncertain of what to add. Barb slammed the door shut.

She heard the officer mutter something. "I know, Jack," the girl answered. "But everybody is."

Releasing the doorknob, Barb went back to the study. As she passed the hall table she saw an envelope. She picked it up. Her name, in Ian's handwriting. She had one foot on the stairs when a fit of coughing started. Her lip curled and she went on down the hall, tossing the envelope into a recycling can.

A Trident sub was on the way back from the Indian Ocean. A radio message reported the skipper had shot himself. Mortality estimates had topped a billion. Troops entering Newark for the first time in a week had yet to find one living thing.

Barb gazed at the blank monitor. Her dark reflection regarded her eyelessly. She saw her lower lip quiver and made it stop. Loading the program, she got back to work.

Friday, May 26 —

There was no news over the net, only a message on how to access the emergency broadcast channel.

Barb didn't mind. She was screening her film, all four hours of it. She'd started this morning and had run through it twice since then. In her lap lay a legal pad, to note ideas and changes. The pages were blank.

She felt much better now. Occasionally she heard sounds from upstairs or outside — Neil or his father, she supposed — but she paid no attention. She was over the hump. Now that the film was done, she'd encompassed the event, worked through it and put it behind her. Creative blues, that's all it had been. When Howard called, they'd talk about it and laugh. When Howard called.

Sparks flashed on a blue-white globe, a dark mound burned, Gaia blazed in radiant glory: I, too, exist in Arcadia. Barb frowned. Effective, yes, but...she'd used the same segue a dozen times. Was that too much?

Worse, the one overarching symbol was missing. The man in the car. She needed that. But it was too late now. The army had taken him away. She'd heard the tank earlier, or sometime yesterday. He wouldn't be back.

Anyway, it might already be in there. She would swear she'd seen him again just a little while ago, his swollen, eyeless head bobbing, his teeth flashing in an endless grin: "God bless you, ma'am." She'd watch it through one more time to make sure.

The monitor pinged. She clutched herself. For a second she couldn't think of what it could be but then she remembered Howard and leapt from the couch, pad dropping at her feet.

She groaned; the screen was blank. But the callback slug displayed his number. He had answered. Pressing the key, she bit her thumb. It kept ringing and she'd almost decided it had been a glitch when the screen lit up.

He was half-turned away, hand reaching for the keyboard. "Howard!" she screamed.

The hand became a fist and shook for a moment. Howard looked up at her. "Hello, Barbara."

His glasses were missing, and he hadn't shaved. His eyes were sunken and ringed with gray circles, and his hair was messier than usual. She ignored all that. He was back, that was what counted. Howard was back. Everything would fall into place now, rightness and balance and clarity return.

"They let you go." The words were a croak.

Howard nodded. "Yes, yes. No punishment for us." He lowered his eyes as if looking for something under his monitor.

"Did they hurt you?" He shook his head and she went on, telling him about Myra, the black man, the film, how she hadn't slept, the burning mound, the car. She was blinking away tears when she finished. "...and those liars are saying somebody made this. It was because of us. All of it. They call it the Greening. But that's not true." She paused, tasting salt at the corner of her lips. "Is it?"

Howard moved for the first time since she began speaking.

"Yes," he said softly. "Yes, it's true."

He squinted, as if wondering who she could be. "They caught one of them. Showed me a confession, a tape.... He seemed proud, very proud."

His face lost all expression. "I knew him...know him. Know them all, in fact. The one they caught was...well, the name means nothing. He told me all about it, several years ago. Their blueprint, their plan. I can see that now. Theory, I thought at the time. Rhetoric and nothing more. But he asked, and I said, 'Why not?'"

He looked away once more. "Two words. It doesn't seem like enough. But..." His face twisted. "It is."

Barb tried to stifle the sounds in her throat. Howard raised his head, his eyes still focused elsewhere. "I watched your film just now. The rain forest, yourself as Gaia, the flames.... It's very powerful, still." He met her eyes at last. "We meant well, Barbara. Don't forget that. We meant well."

His hand crept to the keyboard. "Goodbye, dear lady. God bless you."

She backed away from the dark screen, her cries echoing off the walls. Brown faces screamed, a globe sparkled, Gaia smiled. She ran into the hall, waving them all away.

A voice called from upstairs. She shouted back at it. Go to your whores.... They'll take care of you.... Leave me the fuck alone.... The voice dwindled to a whine and footsteps started down the stairs. She raced for the door.

In the woods the owl hooted. She stumbled off the porch and stopped to catch her breath. Raising her head, she pulled her hair back. No planes, no lights, a black dead sky. They had given up. Just as well. All a waste anyway. It was ended; nothing to be done, no way to make it right. She felt a smile growing and raised a hand to her lips, knuckles mashing them against her teeth.

She spotted the car. It was still *there*. After they'd *promised*. She marched down the drive. Lying bastards. God, she hated it when they lied. Stand there looking right at you and butter wouldn't melt and they lie. They lie about everything. Calling it the Greening. Saying it was her fault. Talking introns, every last one of them. The car had to go. It couldn't be here when Howard came. They had the tank, they could push it away. Or blow it up, either one. They were good at that.

Her gaze caught the gas cans atop the roof. Gas made fire, didn't it? Fire that was pure. Fire that cleansed. Fire that solved everything. She sped up, on tiptoe, moving quietly so as not to waken the black man. He'd want to know what had happened to Neil and what could she tell him? The cap

was on tight and she broke a nail but at last it popped free and the gas gurgled across the roof, cutting through that other stink.

She had no matches. Another howl was stirring in her throat when she remembered the black man's gun. He quivered as she felt around the front seat but she screamed, "No!" and he went still. A knee grazed the hard barrel. She snatched the pistol up from where it had fallen. It was heavy and didn't fire at first but she flipped all the switches until it went off with a healthy roar that threw her arms high.

Shouts came from down the road, and behind her someone called her name. She sighted on the cans and fired once, then again. The third time the barrel hit her forehead and she let the gun drop but the gas had caught with a satisfying whump so it didn't matter.

A searchlight blinded her as she held her arms wide to the warmth of the flames. A motor roared, gave way to a clanking noise. She screamed at it to stop and turned back to the house.

The garden lay in her path. She surveyed it in the clean firelight. She was one to talk. All those weeds — what would Howard say?

She grasped a stalk and ripped it out. Someone came up and coughed as she dropped to her knees to get at the rest. He whispered her name. She ignored him. The clanking grew louder then ceased. Another low whump gave her more light. She kept working. By the time the soldiers reached her the patch was nearly bare.



Separating reality from fiction isn't always easy. In 1982, the late Larry Walters achieved an odd sort of fame by doing pretty much what's depicted in this story. Steve Boyett says he used to wonder why the guy did it. Then he was describing a friend as "someone without a brake pedal" and he flashed on Mr. Walters's Icarian accomplishment...and here's the story that resulted. One likes to think that fiction and reality—the literal and the metaphorical—intersect occasionally in a region that we can call "the truth."

The View from on High

By Stephen R. Boyett

ELDON TURNER IS BLOWING up balloons. One after the other from the helium tank, four-feet-wide neoprene balls he ties off and tucks under the fishing net

he's knotted onto his webbed aluminum recliner lawn chair. It's hot enough to fry an oven and sweat gleams along his bowling-pin arms, glistens pale blue on the jailhouse tattoo sticking out from under the tight sleeve of his white shirt. Eldon's humming along with the rock & roll station on his boombox as he slides the latest balloon beneath the netting. He's feeling pretty swell, right goddamn spiffy if you want to know the truth. The downhill side of a second sweating pitcher of margaritas is largely accountable for this euphoria, and so fucking what?

The lawn chair skitters in a vagrant breeze. Tubular runner knocks BB pistol on unkempt lawn.

The Buchers across the street have draped their porch in American-flag crêpe for their party tonight; already their little rugrats are puncturing the Azusa sky with bottle rockets. Howard Bucher flies for United and added a second story to his house last year; Eldon is a self-employed

welder, and just last week he bought a roll of screening to replace the panels that blew out of the back porch six months ago.

Eldon sucks on the tank nozzle and sings along with the radio. "We got what you n-n-n-n-n-n-need, need, need!" he sings in a chipmunk voice. Next he sucks on the dripping plastic pitcher (he's decided to cut out the middleman of a drinking glass), then laughs and blows margarita all over himself.

Behind him the torn screen door bangs open. "Burgers in five!" calls Shirley.

Eldon belches acknowledgment and the screen door clunks shut.

Time for another balloon. With this one bulging the netting, the lawn chair strains at its tether tied to a tent stake pounded in the grass. "Down, boy," Eldon tells the lawn chair, and pats its aluminum armrest.

Across the street Howard Bucher passes by a living-room window, sees Eldon, waves, passes on. Returns a moment later. Frowning.

Eldon waves, ties off a balloon, sucks on the tank. "You ain't nothin' but a hound dog!" he pipes. Howard isn't at the window now. Eldon's laugh glissandos as his normal voice returns. What a gorgeous fucking day it's turning out to be.

Two more balloons and that tether's nice and tight. Eldon likes the look of it; that single thread is all that keeps him from being some kind of explorer, some kind of pioneer — like Wilville and Orbur, right? Fry the fiendly skies. "It's now or never," he sings, Elvis style.

For his expedition Eldon provisions himself with staples: under the netting go boombox, sweating pitcher, BB pistol, Eldon his own damn self. The lawn chair settles but continues to tango with the vagrant breeze. *What do you think, Captain Kirk?* I think a couple more balloons and we'll be back aboard the *Enterprise*, Mr. Spock. *I think a couple more margaritas and we won't need the balloons, Captain.*

Pshhhhh! Getting kinda crowded in here. Like an ant inside a bunch of grapes. *Pshhhhh!*

Eldon glances back at the house. Shirley flipping burgers and toasting buns, Eldon Jr. and Stephanie, the Stealth refrigerator bandits, scarfing up Dreyer's Cookies & Cream for all they're worth. Their every move and mouthing have been burned into his skull with a soldering iron. The Amazing Mechanical Family. "McFamily," he says, and snorts.

Looks down. Nylon tether taut. Cut the cord, doc. From a pocket unfolds his Buck knife. The lawn chair lists to starboard when he leans and saws. Pitcher cold against a thigh. Bob Seger on the radio. Bottle rockets hiss away across the street. Scouting ahead, he thinks as the knife cuts through. The parted rope coils spineless; the lawn chair rises.

THROUGH CHESSBOARD GAPS in the webbing Eldon sees his house roof dwindle. There's a sunbleached Frisbee up there. *Down* there! He claps his hands and laughs. He's flying, he's *flying*! This contraption has about as much right to be in the sky as a Holstein, but big deal. So does an airplane.

Flying, running on the wind, patchwork quilt beneath him snug against the dragonback tail of San Gabriel range stretching shadows eastward. Hoo-hoo-hoo.

Something whizzes by his lawn chair trailing smoke. Eldon leans left and the lawn chair tilts obligingly. The pitcher rolls against the netting and sweats a tiny rain. Eldon gazes down the skinny gnarled shaft of smoke to the front yard of Bucher's house, where one of the rugrats peers up with a hand hooding his eyes. Howard Bucher joins him and the kid points up. Moon white of Bucher's face. Eldon gives him the finger and stabilizes his lawn chair. He scuds along the breeze rising like a bubble in the ocean, rises till he can cover his house with his hand, his palm, his thumb. He looks like a comic-strip character surrounded by blank thoughts.

Getting kinda cold. How high up is he? How high up will this thing go? Lighter than air, so it'll seek its own air pressure. How the hell high is *that*? You need oxygen after like ten thousand feet. That's nearly two miles!

Limned against the horizon is a distant Piper Cub. Eldon and his lawn chair are even with it. Eldon makes propeller noises with his lips. The land below is a contour map of itself.

Another margarita, Mr. Turner? Why, thanks, Jocko, I do believe I will. I'm sorry, sir, but I can't let you have another drink unless you give me the keys to your lawn chair.

A cluster bomb of loud commercials explodes across the radio. Eldon switches it off. The sudden quiet seems unnatural. Flying ought to have

some kind of noise. Just the *act* of flying should generate sound. For a few minutes it's peaceful; Eldon feels he's touched the core of something, something pure like the note from a nail against a crystal goblet. But the goblet fractures and fear intrudes: suddenly naked and exposed and drunk as a sailor's leave. He's cold and sunburned and the chair straps are branding a checkerboard across his ass and he has to piss like a fire hydrant, and more than that *he doesn't belong up here!*

His lawn chair's heading toward a bank of clouds. Jesus, how high up are clouds? Had he even *seen* clouds when he was on the ground? The late afternoon sun has burnt their edges, turbulent undersides a textured dappled mass. Eldon's breathing in short gasps, slick-palmed, heart jackhammering. Jumping Jesus on a trampoline, what has he done?

From out the crumpled cloth of clouds there comes an angel. Radiant pale and feather-winged glides toward him. Alabaster-faced regards him dark-eyed inscrutable.

"I'm sorry!" says Eldon, crying now. "Jesus, I'm sorry, it was just a gag, I didn't mean—" But he feels the angel is not judging him but has only come to bless him and guide him down. Down, oh, down.

From under his thigh he pulls the BB pistol. Draws down on a balloon and fires. The clap of its demise, though thinned, is shocking, here. The angel is gone and in its place a seagull glides by grating. The lawn chair no longer climbs. Eldon fires again and another balloon gives up the ghost. The lawn chair leans left and sinks as if through gelatin. The last gasp of a third balloon opposite the first two rights him somewhat and speeds his descent.

Warmer now. And his head feels clearer too. The panic returns to its basement room and contents itself with an occasional happy rattle of its chains. Down and down. No faster than this or he'll do a Dorothy-hits-Oz dance. Maybe kill a wicked witch. The chessboard life below is broadening its horizons into familiar territory. There's the 210 Freeway, there's the Safeway, there's the National Guard Armory. There's a lot of traffic stopped for some reason. Stopped for *him*, he realizes, and waves hello.

Eldon turns on the radio. Building level now, tree level. Rock & roll is such good music. Ahead of him are telephone poles and thin smiles of drooping power lines. The wind propels him toward them and he isn't sinking fast enough to drop below. No rudder on this thing, no brakes.



SCIENCE

PAT MURPHY & PAUL DOHERTY

PLAYING WITH FIRE

IF YOU'VE read your Greek mythology (and what reader of

fantasy hasn't?), you know about Prometheus, the Titan who stole fire from the sun and gave it to us mortals. Zeus, miffed by Prometheus's presumption, had the poor Titan chained to a rock. Every day, an eagle came by and ate Prometheus's liver, and every day his liver grew back so that the eagle could snack on it again the next day. Hercules finally rescued Prometheus and slew the eagle — but only after the poor guy had suffered for helping us mortals out.

The Greeks don't say it, but we figure that about five minutes after Prometheus showed up with a flaming torch, some parent somewhere said, "Don't play with that!" Fire is such fascinating stuff. Who can sit by a campfire without poking at it, rearranging the logs, watching the flames? It's true that playing with

fire can get you burned. But that doesn't mean that you can't experiment with it — just a little.

OUR LAWYERS SAY...

In our years of working at the Exploratorium, we have developed many activities for children. It's great fun to create science activities for kids — it gives us an excuse to blow bubbles and build structures from toothpicks and make pinhole cameras and fool around with many interesting things

But we run into trouble, every now and then. Whenever we develop activities for kids, we find activities that we can't, in good conscience, suggest that kids do. These activities usually involve sharp objects or toxic chemicals or fire — especially fire. As responsible staffers at an internationally known museum, we can't, in good conscience, encourage kids to play with matches. Although Paul does

confess (usually after a few glasses of wine) that he played with fire in his youth. He played with gasoline, thermite, high voltage arcs, and other potentially dangerous materials. In fact there are several neighborhoods around the country that still remember him.

But this column is written for adults—fine, upstanding members of the science-fiction-reading community. Surely all of you can be trusted to experiment without scorching yourselves or torching your homes or setting a forest on fire.

If you are under eighteen, please ask an adult to help you with these activities. If you are over eighteen, be careful. As we say at the start of every Exploratorium activity book, "These experiments were designed with safety and success in mind, but even the simplest activity or most common materials can be harmful when mishandled or misused." (Yes, our lawyers made us say that.)

Now that we have warned you about something that you already knew (fire is dangerous stuff!), we are ready to begin. We will start with a series of simple experiments with a candle flame. We will then proceed to describe how Pat has put the knowledge that she gained

through these experiments to practical use by inventing a beverage called the Flaming Rum Monkey.

READ THIS BY CANDLELIGHT

Way back in 1860, noted British physicist and chemist Michael Faraday presented a series of demonstrations titled "The Chemical History of a Candle."

You'll find all the equipment you need to duplicate Faraday's demonstrations at a romantic candlelit dinner for two. (In fact, these experiments could provide an educational diversion if you ever find yourself at a romantic dinner that's not going well.) To try them, you need an ordinary wax taper, some matches, a metal teaspoon, some ice water, and a paper towel or napkin.

Light the candle and watch the flame. When you first light the candle, the flame is small, but after the candle burns for a few minutes, the flame gets taller. If the air is still, the flame's size and appearance quickly becomes stable.

As you watch the candle, take a moment to think about what exactly is burning. Take a close look at the candle flame. On the candle that we observed, the wick stood in

a pool of molten wax, held neatly in a cup of solid wax. There was a very short section of unburned wick between the flame and the molten wax. The flame never traveled down the wick to burn either the pool of liquid wax or the solid wax.

The wick is burning, but that can't be all that's burning. You know that the candle shrinks over time as the flame consumes it, so the wax of the candle must be burning, too. But the wax doesn't burn all at once. The flame stays neatly on the wick, never venturing down the candle. And if you use a burning match to try to light the candle's molten or solid wax, all you get is dripping wax.

Here's an experiment that gives you a clue about what's burning. Light a match, gently blow out the candle flame, then immediately hold the burning match in the smoke that rises from the wick. If you can't see any smoke, hold the match about half an inch above the wick. Poof! Like a magic trick, the flame from the match jumps the gap and re-ignites the wick.

Something is rising from the candle wick, something flammable enough to catch fire and carry that fire back to the wick. That something is wax vapor, the gas produced when wax is heated to its

boiling point, about 350 to 400 degrees Celsius. The vapor rises from the candle wick after you blow out the candle and your burning match re-ignites it.

And that's really what's burning in the candle flame. Only the wax vapor burns, not the liquid or the solid wax. That's why the flame always remains a short distance above the pool of molten wax; molten wax extinguishes the flame.

A candle flame is a kind of self-regulating system. When you light the wick, the heat of the flame melts the wax. The wick soaks up the molten wax through capillary action, just as a paper towel soaks up water. The heat of the flame vaporizes the molten wax in the wick — and the wax vapor burns, feeding the flame. More wax melts and the process continues until all the wax is gone.

If you are brave and careful, you can interrupt this self-regulating system with a pair of tweezers. This is a little tricky — you need to position your hand so the flame doesn't lick your fingers with unfortunate results. If you don't trust yourself to be brave and careful, you can just read about the results. (Usually, we insist that everyone try the experiment, but this time we'll let you off the hook.)

Take a pair of tweezers and carefully pinch the wick just below the flame. Keep the wick pinched tight as the tweezers grow warm in your hand. You'll see the candle flame shrink and go out. By pinching the wick tight, you stop the liquid wax that's rising up the wick and you cut off the flame's fuel supply.

CANDLE FLAME COLORS

If you've pinched your candle out, light it again and take another look at the flame. Look closely and you'll see that the flame isn't uniformly bright. Yellow light comes from the flame's brightest region, which starts near the tip of the wick and rises from there, tapering to a point. The yellow region encloses a darker area: a cone that extends from below the tip of the wick to halfway up the flame. Beneath this cone, at the very base of the flame, there's a region that gives off a faint blue light.

Something different is happening in each part of the flame. You can get some clues about what's happening in each region by using the experimental equipment we mentioned earlier: a shiny metal teaspoon, a glass of ice water, and a paper towel or napkin.

First, hold the bowl of the spoon in the yellow part of the flame for a second.

Remove the spoon from the flame and take a look at it. You'll see black soot coating the metal wherever it came into contact with the yellow part of the flame. Wipe the spoon clean. (Careful — it's hot.) Now pass the spoon through the dark part of the flame, just above the wick. Examine the spoon again. Chances are, it'll be soot-free. If you passed through the yellow part, you may have a touch of soot.

Wipe the spoon clean again. Now hold it just above the yellow part of the flame, not touching the flame at all. When you examine the spoon, you'll see that it's free of soot. Only the yellow part of the flame makes the spoon sooty.

To understand what's going on in various parts of the flame, you also need to know a little bit about what candles are made of. To make a candle, you need something that is solid at room temperature, melts in the heat of a flame, and produces a flammable vapor. Candles can be and have been made of beeswax, tallow from animal fat, spermaceti from the sperm whale, waxes from various plants, paraffin wax derived from petroleum, and combinations of these things. Today, most candles

are made of a composite of paraffin wax and stearic acid produced from animal fat.

As a science fiction reader, you probably know a little chemistry—at least enough to throw around terms like “carbon-based life forms.” Though the waxy substances listed above all have different chemical compositions, they are all carbon-based, composed primarily of chemical compounds made up of carbon and hydrogen and oxygen.

When a candle burns, the chemical bonds that hold these complex molecules together are rearranged. Some bonds are broken and new ones are formed. Some of the atoms combine with oxygen from the surrounding air to make new molecules. The reaction produces heat and light because more energy was stored in the original chemical bonds than is contained in the chemical bonds at the end of the reaction. The excess energy is released as heat and light.

Rather than looking at the complex molecules that make up candle wax, let's begin by considering a simpler situation (a strategy that scientists love to use). Consider the natural gas that produces the beautiful blue flame of your gas stove. Natural gas is the simplest possible

combination of carbon and hydrogen; each molecule is made up of one atom of carbon and four atoms of hydrogen. Chemists write this formula in an abbreviated form as CH_4 .

When natural gas burns, it reacts with oxygen from the air. Since oxygen atoms join together in pairs to make molecules of oxygen, chemists write oxygen as O_2 .

Each molecule of natural gas reacts with two molecules of oxygen to produce a molecule of carbon dioxide (CO_2) and two molecules of water (H_2O), along with heat and light. You could write this reaction as:



The substances used to make candles undergo a similar reaction when they burn. Like natural gas, these waxes burn to make carbon dioxide and water. However, the reaction of these molecules is not as straightforward as the reaction of natural gas. Along the way, the burning wax vapor produces a number of intermediate products that react with each other. The end result is the same, but it takes a little longer to get there.

In the blue part of the flame, wax vapor meets oxygen from the air and burns. This is the hottest

part of the flame, generating most of the candle's heat and reaching temperatures of about 1400 degrees Celsius. Wax vapor burns to make some carbon dioxide and water, but the reaction also breaks many of the wax molecules into smaller, unstable fragments. Radiation from some of these fragments is what makes the blue light you see.

The dark cone near the wick is the coolest part of the flame, ranging from 600 to 1000 degrees Celsius. There's wax vapor in this area, but there's not enough oxygen for the vapor to burn properly. That's why this area looks dark: since the wax vapor can't burn, it doesn't produce light.

In this dark area of the flame, the wax molecules break into fragments that react with one another, producing soot particles comprised mostly of carbon and gases made mostly of hydrogen. The soot and gases rise and continue burning, producing the yellow area of the flame.

You know from your experiment that there are plenty of soot particles in the yellow part of the flame, but none above the flame and none down in the blue part of the flame and the dark cone of the flame. Soot is the product of incomplete combustion. In the yellow tip

of the flame, the soot and hydrogen burn to produce carbon dioxide, water, and bright yellow light. The glowing particles of soot produce most of the candle's light.

When you stuck your spoon into the flame, the metal intercepted some of the soot before it could burn completely. You can see the same effect at work in a kerosene lamp when you make the lamp's wick too long. Too much wick and too little air make for incomplete burning and a sooty lamp chimney.

Now we've been saying that the products of combustion are carbon dioxide, water, heat, and light. Maybe you're wondering where the water is. You can find it with that fine piece of testing equipment: your spoon.

Dip your spoon in the ice water to cool it to below room temperature. Dry the spoon carefully. Then hold the bowl an inch or two above the yellow part of the flame for just a second.

Examine the bowl of the spoon and you'll find that steam has condensed on the cool metal. The steam clouds the shiny metal, as if you had held the spoon to your mouth and breathed on it. If you don't see any steam, cool the spoon and try again, leaving the spoon above the flame for less time. The spoon has to be cold to condense the water

vapor, and if you leave it over the flame too long, it warms up.

The steam on the spoon is water vapor produced by the complete combustion of the wax. There's no soot on the spoon because it burned up in the yellow part of the flame, becoming carbon dioxide that leaves no trace on the spoon.

BEYOND FARADAY

In his role as a scientist (as opposed to his role as a scientific juvenile delinquent), Paul has continued to study fire. (All those experiments as a child finally paid off!) He studied methane flames by zapping them with ultraviolet laser pulses, a technique known as laser-induced fluorescence. A powerful ultraviolet laser pulse excites molecules in the flame (usually OH molecules on their way to becoming H_2O). As the molecules decay they emit spectral lines of light that reveal how many molecules there are and also how fast they are rotating. The rotation rates reveal the temperature of the flame. A fast laser pulse can measure the temperatures in the flame in a billionth of a second, giving a precise picture of combustion.

Laser pointers make great cat toys, which is why Pat and Paul

both have them around the house. If you have a laser pointer, you can follow in Paul's footsteps by shining it onto the flame from a candle.

But before you do, predict what will happen. Will the laser be visible, scattering from the flame? Will the flame block or dim the laser? Now, try the experiment and find out for yourself.

The laser goes right through the yellow flame without any noticeable dimming. Paul finds it surprising that the laser beam can easily go through something that looks opaque. In the yellow flame, a few very small soot particles give out a lot of light, yet they don't interact very strongly with light from the laser. The soot particles are smaller than a wavelength of light and so don't scatter much light.

While you have the laser pointer out, shine it on the candle itself. You'll see lovely shimmering dots of laser light on the candle. That's called laser speckle. The speckles are produced by interference of the laser beam with itself as it scatters from the candle wax.

THE FLAMING RUM MONKEY

Experimenting with candles is a fine excuse for a candlelit dinner.

If you drink white wine with your candlelit dinner, we recommend that you take a look at the shadow of your wine glass. The rounded sides of a full wine glass cause it to act like a lens, focusing an image of the candle flame. It's fun to play with these images, but we'll save the discussion of optics for another column. We have just enough space left to talk about the Flaming Rum Monkey — an experiment, a literary device, and a cocktail that Pat thinks will take the world by storm.

Mary Maxwell, a pseudonym under which Pat sometimes writes, is also a character in the novel that Pat is currently writing. And Mary Maxwell's favorite drink is the flaming rum monkey, a drink that didn't exist until Pat (collaborating with fellow sf writer Ellen Klages) invented it last week.

Before we provide you with the recipe, we must reiterate our earlier admonitions. Fire is dangerous stuff. Alcohol (with or without fire) can be even more dangerous. If you are not yet of drinking age, we suggest you limit your experimentation to burning alcohol under adult supervision. If you are of drinking age, please experiment with caution and do not drive after experimenting.

Now, here's the recipe. Put a teaspoon of brown sugar and a sprinkling of cloves, nutmeg, and cinnamon, and a teaspoon of coconut syrup (the kind used in pina colodas) in a warm mug. Put in a little boiling water — just enough to dissolve the sugar — and let it steep for a minute. Add two ounces of dark Jamaican rum and one ounce of dark crème de cacao. Fill the mug with boiling water and stir.

Put a pinch of brown sugar in a big spoon. Fill the spoon with 151 proof rum. Hold the spoon over the mug filled with the hot mixture to warm the rum in the spoon.

Now you're ready for the flames. Light the rum in the spoon. Tip the spoon into the mug. The mixture in the mug will burn with a lovely blue flame.

We suggest you experiment with these lovely blue flames just as you experimented with the candle. (Did you think we were just giving you an excuse to drink rum? Hey, we're scientists! First, we experiment. Then we drink rum.) Once again, you'll need a metal spoon, some ice water, and a towel or napkin.

Pass the spoon through the blue flames, then check it for soot. (When we tried this, the spoon came out clean.) Chill the spoon in the ice

water and check for water vapor. (We found it in abundance.)

Now here's a question to see if you've been paying attention. Why do you suppose we asked you to warm the 151 proof rum before you lit it?

Here's a hint: what's burning when you light the rum? The vapor, of course! The 151 proof rum is about 75 percent ethyl alcohol or ethanol. The molecular formula for ethanol is C_2H_5OH , and its vapor burns hot and clean. The flame is blue because the combustion is quick, not producing soot as an intermediate product.

Now, if you like, you can blow out the flames and try a sip of your Rum Monkey. Hot, sweet, and touched with coconut — Pat says it tastes a bit like an alcoholic

Mounds bar. (Be warned — the Rum Monkey is a potent drink. We recommend that you complete your experimentation with fire before you consume any Rum Monkeys.)

Being a scientist at heart, Paul is now wondering about the temperature distribution in the flames from a flaming rum monkey. He guesses he'll have to write a grant for "Laser-Induced Fluorescence Studies of the Combustion Byproducts of Organically Derived Ethanol." Any excuse for playing with fire!

Note: For more about Pat Murphy's and Paul Doherty's work, check out their web sites at: www.brazenhussies.net/murphy and www.exo.net/~pauld. ☞

COMING ATTRACTIONS

SEPTEMBER SEEMS LIKE a good month to get carried away, doesn't it? As good as any, we think, so next month we'll be bringing you a creative tale by James L. Cambias entitled, simply, "The Alien Abduction."

Also on next month's schedule is a new fantasy from Jack Cady. In "Jeremiah," he takes a look at the generation that came of age in the 1960s and considers where they're at now.

Other promises we'll keep include new stories by Michael Blumlein, Esther Friesner, Mark W. Tiedemann, and many more.

Our October anniversary issue is coming together rapidly, and it seems as though we'll have first-rate fiction from Ray Bradbury, Carolyn Ives Gilman, Alexander Irvine, James Morrow, Robert Reed, and Lewis Shiner to celebrate our fifty-first year. Hope you'll be there!

If Tananarive Due's story in this issue hasn't already gotten you worried about germs, this new tale from one of irony's reigning queens will likely have you scrubbing your hands with some antibacterial goop. In fact, you might want to wash up before you read this one—really, just think of where this magazine might have been.

This story comes to us from an unusual source, a theme anthology entitled The Touch edited by Patrick Merla that is due out in a month or two. The anthology's theme, created by Steven-Elliot Altman, concerns "Deprivers" who can render people senseless with a passing touch. (You can find out more at their Website, www.deprivers.com.) The anthology is a Write Aid project and benefits from it go to two international charities, the Health Education AIDS Liaison and the Foundation for Advancement in Cancer Therapy.

Precautions

By Kit Reed

"DON'T TOUCH THAT," Mother said, and I didn't. "Don't go near that. You don't know what's going around."

Well, we all knew, or we sort of did. Terrible things. Staph infections that science can't touch, plus Mother said everybody knows you catch cancer off another person, and nobody wants to do that; "AIDS," she said, "don't even say it or you'll get sick."

She sounded so scared that Billy and me clung to her legs and bawled until she promised to keep us safe. The world is a hotbed. You've seen the TV. Everybody who's still out there is getting sick. Smallpox is back, to say nothing of bubonic plague. Tuberculosis creeps up on your best friend without you knowing; smile at them wrong and the next thing you know, you've got it too. Quarantine! Triple-locked doors, nurses in masks, they take out one lung and you get it in the other.

"I love you," Mother said to us. "I'd rather see you dead."

Pestilence is loose in the land, one day you're fine; run into the wrong person and the next, you are Infected.

"And you can't tell who's sick! They may look like you or me," Mother told us, "but they don't DO like we do." That was the day she cut her friends off except for phone time, even though Margaret and Etta are clean as anybody and her best friends in the world, the world being where Father went that I am not allowed to go.

You could catch It!

"What, Mother? Catch what?"

"Better safe than sorry," Mother said. She loved her friends but she wiped off the mouthpiece every time they talked.

Then Margaret got necrotizing fascitis and they had to cut off her arm. Mother quit picking up the phone. "Germs," she said, and for a while she was okay with talking on the speaker. "You can get them before you even know." And poor Etta, she was nice to a stranger and caught herpes, so that was that. When Mother left off phoning, Etta and Margaret wrote letters, but you can't be too careful. When you're scared of germs after a while you start getting scared of everything that might have been near germs. You're scared of germs coming off of people and you're scared of germs getting on things like envelope glue, even though the mail person has strict instructions to put your snail mail in the De-con box outside the front door.

We count on De-con to keep us safe. That plus the air lock.

The first De-con box cost us a bundle, Mother ordered it off the web after Uncle Seymour died of strep, he was the first, and the improved De-con Enhanced Support cost a heap of Father's insurance money, but it is a fantastic service that allows us to go on living the way God meant us to, Uncontaminated. Safe.

That and the care Mother took, starting the first day the bad wind blew in from somewhere else and changed the world.

"Flu," Father said when he got in from work that day. "Everybody in the office is sick."

"Daddy, Daddy." Billy and me clamored around his legs.

Mother yelled, "Don't touch him!" and yanked us away.

Father said to her, "What are you doing?"

"Stand back! The whole world is a contagious ward."

"Don't worry," Father said. "I'm fine."

"Don't try and kid me," Mother said. "There was a special report on

TV, this is the worst flu ever. Plus, side effects! And you were just out in it."

"I didn't go anywhere, just to the office."

"On the bus. That's another hotbed. All those people, breathing on you. Who knows what you picked up? And the office! Out of the hotbed and into the incubator. The workplace. The TV says the workplace is the worst." She handed Father his walking papers and shoved him out the door, which she locked and bolted.

He cried on the front lawn until Mother rolled a pup tent and a week's worth of food off the roof. For days he camped outside our front window, calling. "Day four, and I'm not even sneezing. Day five, and I'm fine. Day six...."

"Not yet," our mother said. "We have to be sure."

Then on the seventh morning, we heard him sneeze. "I didn't mean it," he cried. "It was an acci — achoo!"

"That does it!" Mother screamed, and took the Glock Daddy kept under his pillow to protect us from burglars and started firing from the roof. "I love you, but go," she yelled, being careful to hit the ground behind him as he ran. "And don't come back until you're clean." She fired again, herding him into the street.

We heard a screech. He got hit by a truck.

Of course we cried, but when it's a matter of your own health and safety, you shut up fast. After all, I mean, first things first. Mother pulled herself together. "I'll keep you safe," she vowed. "No matter what it takes."

"Okay," Billy said, "Me and Dolly are going out to play."

"Outside!" Mother grabbed him. "Not on your life! Something terrible could happen to you and you wouldn't even know."

"But I want to go out and play." Billy always was rebellious. He looked ready to hit and yell.

"Not now," Mother said. "You neither, Doll," she said to me. She shuttered the windows. Through De-con she ordered and mounted a defense missile on the front porch roof, IN CASE, and showed us how to use it. She sealed us in. "You'll thank me later. This is for your own good."

"When?" I was scared and excited. Less excited than scared.

"Soon, I promise, just as soon as they get all these sick people put away."

It was a little song she sang to keep us safe. AS SOON AS THEY GET ALL THESE SICK PEOPLE PUT AWAY. And every night we had a little party, cookies and ginger ale. We put on costumes and made jokes. Once a month we tested the defenses. Ready. Arm. Everything but fire. If one of Them tries to get in.... She made paper hats for us. "Aren't we having fun," Mother said. She was laughing and laughing. "Aren't we having fun!"

So Billy and me, we stayed in, and I can tell you we were damn glad. We saw the ravages on TV. "Just as soon as they get all these sick people put away." Truth? There was a whole world out there that we weren't using, and I could hardly wait.

But here's the trick of it. You can't get people put away when you don't know which ones they are.

Mother said we wouldn't be in here long, but she worked on our armaments while we slept. It's been a while, but at least I'm safe.

So we have Mother to thank. And De-con. We never touch anything any sick person touched.

We order from Web-TV, no problem, De-con guarantees that no germs get into your food and none come in on the clothes you ordered off the web or from the Shopping Channel and what if it's maybe a little lonely you can count on e-mailing eBay or Amazon.com and they'll mail you back, you might get a computer virus but at least you are safe. Or, and this is great! With the Shopping Channel, you can phone in and sometimes they put your phone call on TV. Imagine. You can tune in and hear yourself talking to the shopping host right there on the air! Plus, you get safe, germ-free delivery of anything you want, from your Albanian Aardvark to a Jivaro shrunken head. Who needs to go out? Our lives were full!

I guess.

It's interesting, sitting there in front of the TV-puter most of the day. You're, like, CONNECTED to all the billions of others for as long as you stay logged on but you can't touch them, and this is weird. I was sitting in here protecting all my senses from contamination and all I wanted was to be touched.

I guess Billy did too. He said, "I want to go out and meet some people I'm not related to."

Mother smacked him. "No way."

Oh, but we were safe. So safe! See, hear, feel, taste, touch, HAVE

anything you want. Get excited ordering it and then get excited waiting for it to come. Well, anything that got delivered to the De-con box and made it through the double-sealed de-germified air lock in our front hall. But what's the point of the perfect dress if nobody sees you in it except your brother and your mom? Billy and I would have had friends, I would have had cute guys to go out with, except Mother wouldn't let us go to school.

And I will tell you this about it. Mother did it because she loves us but home education is the pits. The whole world going on outside, we saw it on TV and on the web, and Billy and me stuck in Father's den, which she had converted to the schoolroom, us and Mother. Sitting too close and breathing the same stale air.

"What do you think, class?"

"I don't know. What do you think, Mom?"

It got old. Billy was the first to crack. He got big and started ogling all these women on TV.

"Stop that. That's just *Baywatch*," Mother said.

"I don't care what it is, I want to go to the beach!" He meant he wanted to go out in the world and consort with jiggy girls.

"That show's so old those girls are probably dead." Mother said, "Girls aren't like that anymore."

"Prove it." Oh my gosh he was ogling me.

I started to cry.

Mother smacked him. "You leave your sister alone."

The next morning he was gone.

It's amazing how Billy got out. He made it through the airlock and out of the De-con box. I tried but I was growing hips and boobs and they were getting in the way. Every once in a while he would try to phone but Mother wouldn't let me pick up. "That was your brother," she'd say. "He wants to come back but remember, he made his choice when he left us for the germs. Now I'm warning you, NO MATTER WHAT HE DOES OR SAYS, DON'T LET HIM IN."

It's okay, I didn't miss him too much. I went out on the Internet and met a lot of cool guys. Amazing what people will tell you when they can't see you. Amazing what you tell them.

Then Mother got sick. Except she didn't call it sick. How I knew there was something bad the matter was, she started teaching me how to run the

world: where the money was, the pin numbers for all our accounts, how to make e-transfers to keep the De-con service and how to pay for the food and the clothes she ordered for us and how to accessorize. The jewelry she'd gotten from the Shopping Channel, she divided into two heaps.

"This is for you." She swept one pile my way. The other, she kept. "I'm going to be buried in this."

"What's buried?" I said.

"Don't worry," she said. "It's not contagious. And wherever God takes me, I promise, I'll protect you to the grave."

I did like she wanted. I took the DigiCam and after I did her makeup and laid her out in all her jewelry and the Melissa Rivers kaftan with the solid gold trim, I took lots of pictures and I posted them in the right place on the Web. Then I did like she ordered and put her down the Dispos-Al a little bit at a time. The bones I left in the De-con box and the De-con company took them away. He said through the intercom, "Are you okay in there?"

"Never better," I said.

Except it's really quiet in here.

After she died everything was pretty much the same. Stuff kept coming — clean and safe. But safe turned out not to be enough. Except for the necessities, I left off shopping. Nobody to dress up for, nobody to care. It was quiet as hell. One day at delivery time I left the air lock open and when the De-con signal went off to tell me the outside box was opening, I stuck my head in the hole so the delivery guy would hear me direct. "Come on in!"

"Lady, you shouldn't do this. You could catch something."

"You're bonded," I told him. "It's okay."

"You got no idea what's out here."

"Cute guys," I said. "I saw them on TV."

"But some of them are carrying terrible diseases. Women too!" He sounded muffled; okay he was talking through his De-con filter mask. In the surveill camera, he looked like he was wearing a gigantic rubber glove. Since Mother died I haven't talked to anyone direct and I was starved for it. Just me and one other, naked face to naked face.

"No problem," I told him. I was wearing Mother's Pamela Anderson outfit from QVC. "I'll stay away from them."

"Precautions," the delivery man said. "No telling what you might run into out here."

"At least I'd be running into SOMETHING," I said but I took his word for it and let it go by. Along with the days. Along with a lot of other days.

Until I found the ad on the web. SEX AND GLORY, the header ran. SAFE AND TOTAL LOVE WITH THE PERFECT PARTNER — GENDER APPROPRIATE.

I read the disclaimers. I gasped at the down payment. I sold everything I had on eBay and took all the money to do it.

I ordered a guy.

The De-con truck pulled up on the morning appointed. The assistant driver ran a forklift around and unloaded the crate. There were air holes in the crate, it was strapped with warning tape: DO NOT BEND. THIS SIDE UP. I saw it on the surveill TV.

The driver said through the intercom, "I got a questionable delivery."

"No questions. I ordered it."

"It won't fit in the De-con box."

"You can set it down out there and leave." Mother taught us to be cautious. "I'll bring it in."

"You shouldn't come out."

"Okay, okay," I said. "You can just open it and leave."

"No way! The crate's been damaged. De-con guarantees protection and no way am I going to be liable. God knows what could have gotten inside."

"I don't care."

"Lady, anything that happens to you comes out of my hide. I can't leave you alone with this thing. You could sue the company."

"I'll take the responsibility."

"Sorry, Ma'am." The De-con guy gestured to the assistant and they started to put the thing back on the truck. I armed the defense missiles and blew both of them away.

It took all the tools in the basement to blow the air lock and get the front door open but I finally managed. I pushed it aside and I came tottering out. Me, Dolly Meriwether, alone out in the world. It was weird! The box was sitting right where the delivery men had left it. I thought I heard thumping. It seemed to bulge.

My guy.

There were air holes, all right, and there were plastic kibbles dribbling from one corner where the crate had smashed. There was also a warning label. MANUFACTURER NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR DAMAGED GOODS OR CONTAGION INCURRED IN TRANSIT.

I put my mouth up to the hole. "Can you hear me? Are you in there?"

I thought I heard a voice.

Oh Mother, I was so excited! I could almost hear Mother hissing, "Leave it alone, Dolly. That thing is full of germs!"

"I don't care!" I opened the box with the crowbar. The sides fell away. Plastic kibbles cascaded down. He was standing there smiling in his orange coverall. "Hello."

Mother hissed from beyond the grave. "Don't touch that thing, you don't know where it's been!"

My guy stepped out of the kibbles. He was nice and apologetic. "I'm here on approval. Truth in advertising, I have to tell you this. If the seal on the box is broken, your product may be contaminated. You can return it and get your money back."

I looked at the corner of the crate. "No problem," I said.

"Look," he said. "I was in a warehouse with a bunch of. Um. I'm sorry, I might of caught something."

"No problem," I said. I grabbed his arm and yanked him inside with me. "Kiss me," I said.

"Even if I'm...?"

I shut his mouth with my mouth and it was the best thing I ever tasted in this world. Then sirens started blatting and guns I didn't even know were in the walls around us slipped out of their slots — the automatic firing squad Mother had planted in the middle of some long-dead night. I heard a hundred clicks. The weapons arming. I heard her voice. "I TOLD YOU I'D PROTECT YOU TO THE GRAVE."

"I love you," I yelled at him as a hundred triggers drew back. "Get out!"

But I know it is too late for both of us.



Rod Garcia is the author of several novels, including The Spiral Dance, The Virgin and the Dinosaur, and American Woman. He lives in Washington and has been one of our most prolific—and most popular—writers. His exotic space adventures and historical fantasy stories are rich in detail and always engaging.

"The Iron Wood" marks a bit of a departure, just in the sense that it's a rare fantasy for him that isn't set in a real, historical setting. The medieval world of Markov with its unusual forests is every bit as enthralling as past tales from this writer's pen (if not more so). Let's hope we'll get to see more of it in the future.

The Iron Wood

By R. Garcia y Robertson

Devil Cat

“**T**HIS WILL BE CAPITAL FUN,” the grinning idiot in armor declared, gesturing at the mob blocking the rutted roadway.

D'Cey doubted that. Doubted it a lot. Keeping a gloved hand on his sword hilt, he twisted in the saddle, seeing nothing funny about frightened serfs in sackcloth tunics waving farm tools as if they were weapons. He saw axes, flails, and hayforks — but no proper pikes or halberds, thank God. It was a flogging offense for a serf to own so much as a boar spear. Death to be caught with a sword. D'Cey had thought such edicts harsh; now they had his hearty endorsement. Luckily, he had a dozen crossbowmen at his back, hired felons eager to kill their countrymen for a few coppers a day.

“What has them so scared?” D'Cey hated not speaking the language. He knew French, Greek, and enough Latin to talk to God, as well as his native Langue d'Oc — but only a smattering of Markovite. Which made

him dependent on the supercilious young boyar beside him — Baron Alexi D'Medved, six feet of boastful swagger in a satin surcoat and mail shirt, his head as empty as his helmet. Chevalier Reynard D'Cey was some inches shorter, with a cultured outlook, and dreamy pensive features now shading into alarm. Distrusting his cocksure companion, he dearly wished for some sure means of communicating with the crowd.

Alexi smirked at the terrified serfs. "They say it's a devil-cat."

D'Cey arched an eyebrow. French was the language of chivalry, but not every chevalier could speak it. Alexi's astonishing accent made English sound intelligible. "A fool's holiday," Alexi assured him. "An excuse to lock themselves in their hovels, sending out wives for wood and water. Or to parade about demanding protection, neglecting crops and labor services."

Scanning the terror-stricken faces, D'Cey did not think the commotion would just go away. "So there is no man-eating cat?"

Alexi shrugged. "Now and again a leopard out of the Iron Wood eats someone's cow or child. But a demon cat? Hardly!" He rose in his stirrups, lifting a gloved hand and shouting to the crowd in atrocious French, "You are all craven witless idiots — are you not?" He got back a roar of hopeful approval. "Useless, ignorant, lice-eating brutes — the whole thieving lot of you." More cheers. Alexi settled back in his seat, grinning with delight. "Only regular beatings keep them honest and alert."

That morning the young boyar had flogged a groom half to death for burning the meat, breaking a dog whip while the helpless serf blubbered for mercy. So far as D'Cey could see, this impromptu whipping improved neither the tone nor content of the meal — which were indifferent at best — overdone beef, beet roots, and a vile wine could barely be styled breakfast.

Being in exile, D'Cey happily imposed on serf hospitality, finding the typical Markovite tolerably clean and slavish to a fault — offering the bread on his table, the cloak off his back, and the wife in his bed. "Whatever your lordship requires." Warm snug hovels had painted birds and carved troll faces guarding the door, and pots of pig-bran bubbling on the hearth. Despite a superstitious horror of musical instruments, young and old sang in drunken harmony round the dung fire. Baron Alexi lived in a lord's paradise, but was too fool to see it. Men were worshipfully

obedient. Women buxom and agreeable. Until now, D'Cey had not known they could become dangerously excited.

Alexi spurred his mount and they headed off, the crowd treading anxiously at the crossbowmen's heels. Dun steppe stretched into hazy distance behind them. Ahead the immense plains of Markovy met the black line of the Iron Wood. D'Cey rode past ill-tilled fields and a glum mud and log hamlet. Women lifted leather door curtains. Angelic children peeped from behind bright embroidered skirts, eyes wide watching them pass.

Despite the young boyar's sangfroid, D'Cey saw sure signs of a man-killer on the loose. Fields untended. Fruit rotting on the trees. No travelers on the road. Farm animals taken inside. Women not working, children not playing. No cook fires because no one dared gather wood. Ahead stood their day's destination, a tall Byzantine keep — Kara Zamak — the stronghold of a local family Alexi meant to call on and intimidate. They had an heiress ripe for marriage that the D'Medveds wanted. Already Alexi acted like the land and serfs were his.

The young boyar called a halt. D'Cey spotted what looked like caltrops dotting the roadway. Fascinated, he swung out of the saddle, walking forward for a closer look. Kneeling down, he examined the first of the spiked objects — a black iron sprig breaking out of the ground, thick as his thumb and sharp at the tip, with three wicked prongs sprouting from halfway up the stem.

Dusk cast long shadows over abandoned fields. D'Cey saw more iron weeds thrusting through the clay roadbed, rising into a forest of tall black trees. Like most everyone D'Cey had heard his fortune misread, and seen weeping beggar women burnt as witches. He had even bought love potions, which never worked on the right women. But here was magic, solid and real, right at his finger tips — as sure as death and as strong as the Devil. A shiver descended his spine. Until now the Iron Wood had been an abstract wonder — like the Great Wall around Cathay. It was totally different to see the metal trees themselves, to realize they were on the march, swallowing farms and fields.

Walking back to his pack horse, he unslung the shield hanging from his saddle bow and got out his steel gorget, determined not to go a step further without proper precautions.

Alexi shook his head, saying, "The lazy sots are supposed to keep the road clear." D'Cey nodded, picturing villeins down on their knees, weeding with hammers and chisels. He fixed the gorget about his neck — knowing leopards went for the throat. A gasp ran through the crowd as he slipped the leather cover off his shield. Serfs crossed themselves, muttering, "Koshka."

"They even fear your shield." Alexi pointed to the D'Cey crest, a black leopard asleep on a blue field — and above it the family motto, "Don't Wake Him."

Sending back the horses, they set out walking between the iron sprouts. The sun sank into the tarnished blue and gold of northern twilight. D'Cey had become used to long days and brief nights — he heard the winters were frigid and dark, bleak beyond belief. Fishing into his belt pouch, he got out a sprig of mint to chew on. Normally he used it to freshen his breath; now he chewed out of nervousness.

Villagers claimed the leopard had gone to ground at the edge of the Iron Wood, pointing out a small cave blocked with stones and spiked branches, ringed by serfs with lit torches. By now D'Cey thoroughly disliked the whole business. The black iron trees, the darkening landscape, the blocked up hole, and the expectant serfs — none of it boded well. Sucking on his sprig of mint, he suggested waiting for morning. "This half-light favors the leopard. A night in that hole without food or water will make the beast far more tractable."

Alexi scoffed, "We are not dealing with a real leopard. This is a devil-cat. Remember? They are not capable of penning a leopard."

D'Cey admitted it seemed unlikely. He knew a lot about leopards — his family's amoral beast. They were smart and wary, with trip-wire senses. No mob of serfs could likely catch one, unless it had been lamed. But D'Cey would happily bed down in a nest of cobras rather than disturb a trapped leopard.

With big full summer moon rising, Alexi insisted on ending things here and now. "They have watched this hole a day and a night, scared to look inside. We cannot skulk off, or cower before an empty hole. The main thing is not to show fear before villeins — it makes them insolent and unmanageable."

D'Cey drew his sword, chewing thoughtfully. "Doubtless, you know

best." To D'Cey the main thing was not to be shredded by a leopard. Count D'Medved had made him vaguely responsible for Alexi, but no power came with that responsibility. Like most of his class, the young boyar was quarrelsome, ignorant, and fiercely opinionated, while D'Cey was a mere foreigner, a noble guest, tolerated but not listened to.

"Keep the serfs back," Alexi ordered, meaning to go forward alone. "And make sure no one cocks a bow." D'Cey nodded. A wild shot in this half-light would skewer some hapless serf. Putting his shield in front of him, he let Alexi be the hero. Given the chance, D'Cey would have staked a hundred crowns on the cave being empty — but he would not bet his life on it.

Marching up to the hole, his sword sheathed, Alexi briskly rolled the rocks away. One by one he heaved aside the heavy iron branches, then he straightened up, standing triumphantly over the opening. He turned and called for a torch.

A spotted streak shot out of the ground, knocking Alexi off his feet. The leopard landed on his throat, cutting short a gurgling scream. For a frozen second the crowd stared in open-mouthed terror. Then the amber and black cat sprang straight at the circle of men. Dropping crossbows and hay rakes, they scattered like scared mice, letting hell take the hindmost. The devil-cat vanished into the Iron Wood. D'Cey found himself standing alone, shield raised and sword drawn, looking foolish.

Silence descended, brittle as Barbary glass. Picking up a dropped torch with his shield hand, D'Cey walked over to where the boyar lay. Even in bad light Alexi was a horrid sight. His throat ripped open, the talkative young boyar had drowned in his noble blood — making D'Cey doubly glad to be wearing his gorget. He shuddered and shook his head. Gross, boorish, and given to immense airs, Alexi had been a decent enough traveling companion. Prone to pompous soliloquy, but keen as a dagger when talk turned to dogs or women.

D'Cey tossed the torch down the hole, standing ready with his sword, sucking on his bit of mint. The way his luck had run, they could easily be facing two leopards.

Nothing happened. One leopard, and that one gone. D'Cey looked up at Kara Zamak on its moonlit ridge, with the Iron Wood lapping at its walls. No one had set out from the castle to greet them. They looked to

be holing up for the evening — a wise decision. Meaning he must deal with this alone, hardly speaking the language, with the man who had brought him here lying dead.

Sheathing his sword, he picked up a fallen crossbow. The former owner had been frantically trying to load when the leopard dashed at them. His goat's-foot lever lay nearby, along with a heavy armor-piercing quarrel. Bracing the stock against his leg, D'Cey used the goat's-foot to cock the heavy steel bow — then slid the quarrel into the groove. Only one shot, but that was all you got with a leopard. Too bad it was not a proper broadheaded hunting bolt. Heavy quarrels designed to punch through armor did less damage to a thin-skinned cat.

He went through the cocking and loading motions by feel, never taking his gaze off the edge of the Iron Wood. So long as the leopard did not move, the beast would be invisible in that tangle of dark limbs. D'Cey's only warning would be the flash of the cat leaping from cover. One shot, and cat would be on him, trying to get past the steel at his throat.

How could he equalize the contest? Crawling into the cave and sticking the crossbow out the entrance was no doubt the wisest course — but spending the night in a hole had no great appeal. The only answer was to go up. Selecting a sturdy looking tree close to the kill site, D'Cey climbed up into the cold metal limbs. Leopards were amazing climbers, but their claws could not bite into iron bark. Only his gloves, boots, and mail shirt got him past the spiked branches.

Lying down on a large iron limb, he poked the crossbow ahead of him, resting it on a metal branch, pointed right at the body. The best place to trap a leopard is over its own kill. The body lay on bare ground close to the trees — if the cat came back D'Cey would get a decent shot. He watched and waited.

Slowly the moon climbed higher, casting soft spiked shadows. The Iron Wood was dead silent. No night birds called. No hedgehogs snuffled about. What did the leopards live on? Even the most dedicated man-eater depended on deer, hares, and grouse to fill out his diet. The Iron Wood had none of these. Sheer hunger should draw the leopard back to its kill, especially after a night and day in that cave. Unless this was a devil-cat.

Boredom descended. He spit out the last of the mint, which had long lost its taste. He counted his troubles to stay awake. Already D'Cey saw

himself blamed for losing this young boyar. Hopefully, when it came time to face the D'Medveds, he would have a dead leopard to show them. So far most Markovites had treated him like a cross between visiting royalty and a criminal lunatic, forced drink on him and demanded tales of the far off west — while forbidding him to play music or pray in Latin. Calling the Pope a heretic and his lyre an instrument of Satan. The place made Transylvania seem civilized. And this was deepest darkest Markovy, at the edge of the Iron Wood.

Lying stretched out on the cold iron limb, he remembered white hot summers along the Garonne, sitting in the rippling shade of living plane trees, watching sunlight beat down on terraced vineyards. He remembered days spent hawking, or hunting with the leopards on his ancestral manor. And warm scented evenings when minstrels played and dancing was no crime. All that was lost. He had not planned to be a penniless exile, living off a noble name. That came from lack of foresight, and astounding ill luck.

By first light, he no longer believed that hunger would bring the cat back. Numb with cold, and bored beyond endurance, he shifted his cramped position as silently as he could, until he sat astride the cold iron. Keeping the crossbow pointed at the body, he raised his head to get a better view. Nothing showed. Just the body and the cave entrance, with farm tools and burnt torches lying where they had fallen. Lifting his head he called out, giving his best imitation of a female leopard's mating cry. Nine out of ten man-eaters were males. Maybe this one would come out for love, if not for a meal.

No response. But he kept on calling, mainly to keep awake. Dawn was not far off. The short summer night was nearly over.

Then, when he least suspected, it happened.

Out the corner of his eye, D'Cey saw a movement in the half-light, a shadow sliding along the iron line of trees. He froze, holding tight to the bow, keeping it pointed at the clearing around the body. The movement ceased. Cautiously D'Cey gave the leopard call again, as high and plaintive as he could make it.

The shadow slipped closer. He could make it out only when it moved. As soon as the leopard stopped, it seemed to dissolve into the ground. Barely two dozen paces away, the beast blended perfectly into the gray

shadows. There the cat could study the clearing from cover, and not come out until the last moment. D'Cey called once more, putting all his talent as a troubadour into the mating cry — all his loneliness in this strange land.

The leopard came on, still indistinct, hugging the ground, fading into the shadows near the foot of the tree. Silently D'Cey shifted the bow, aiming at the most likely spot for the leopard to break cover, hoping his heart was not banging too loud. He needed just one good look at the beast, and he could shoot. He called again.

This time he got an answer. From far off to his right came the cry of a leopard, a real female, competing with his call, challenging him for the man-eater's affections. *Merde!* It was a compliment of sorts, managing to make this distant female jealous. Desperately D'Cey tried to match the mating call, but it was hopeless. Pitted against the real thing, there was no way he could sound half so enticing. The leopard slipped swiftly back along the line of iron trees, disappearing into the metal wood. D'Cey groaned. So much for his powers of seduction.

Scapegoat

BLOOD RED DAWN showed hot and bright between black iron branches. D'Cey could tell the day would be torrid. He heard his crossbowmen returning, talking to keep their spirits up — though the lovesick man-eater was long gone. Descending from his perch, he ordered them to take care of Alexi's body, saying in French, "Cover him up. And get a horse to carry him." He made lifting and wrapping motions, adding their word for horse — "Loshat." They understood, or more likely figured it out themselves. It was hard to be commanding when he could not speak the language.

With Alexi slung over a plow-mare, D'Cey mounted the hot dusty cattle path leading to the Byzantine-style keep — Kara Zamak, which meant "Black Castle" in the local dialect. Alive, the young boyar had been rude, ignorant, and quarrelsome, but nonetheless useful. Dead, he was a dumb unwanted burden. Even the leopard did not bother to make a meal of him. On his way up to the keep D'Cey saw a woman's slipper print in the powdery dust. A lucky omen.

Tired and dirty, he reached the top, and got a sweeping view of the simmering landscape. To the east lay the Iron Wood, a haunted black-spiked barrier with no sane reason for being. To the west undulating steppe stretched endlessly under a bright boiling lead sky. Somewhere to the south caravans toiled over the Silk Road between Far Barbary and Black Cathay. Kara Zamak was cut off from civilized lands not by mountains or rivers, but by limitless hazy distance. D'Cey bet nothing good ever came over that shimmering horizon, just drought, plague, and tax collectors. Plus the odd plundering pagan horde, burning hovels and stealing women. No wonder the weaponless serfs were so paranoid. They had no middle ground. Everything was right on top of them, or unthinkably remote.

Waiting to be admitted, he ran an approving eye over Black Castle's defenses — reminding him of Chateau Gaillard in Normandy, Coeur de Lion's "beautiful daughter." Walls sat on solid bedrock, making mining impossible, and on three sides the curtain came right to the edge of a sheer rock ravine only a sparrow could climb. Iron treetops poked out of the gorge below. The place had to be taken by starvation, or a costly frontal assault. Beside him at the gate stood a breaking wheel and flogging stake, uncomfortable reminders that boyar law was written with the whip and burning iron. In Markovy, "break every bone in your body" was no mere figure of speech.

Kazak archers swung the gate aside, revealing a dry moat and inner drawbridge, protected by a portcullis at each end. With only one approach to defend, tremendous care had been lavished on making the place impregnable. Arrow slits faced inward, covering the inner drawbridge from all sides; machicolations overhead allowed intruders to be drenched with boiling oil, or something similarly noxious. D'Cey estimated he could hold the gatehouse and flanking towers against all of Christendom with a score of men — a mere dozen if they were fit and willing.

In the castle courtyard stood a comely old woman, poised and slender, with heavy-lidded almond eyes — a sign of Kazak blood. In youth she must have been stunning, with high proud cheekbones and skin like fine porcelain. Even now she took care to look her best, wearing cloth-of-silver trimmed with ermine, and a gold comb in her snow-white hair. A scarlet-coated dwarf gravely announced, "Lady Ingra Ukhova of Iron Wood."

D'Cey went down on one knee, and a grinning Kazak lifted Alexi's head by the hair. Lady Ukhova sniffed, saying, "Here is one who won't be missed" — adding something unintelligible in Turkic. Laughing, the Kazak let the head drop. His mistress addressed D'Cey. "Him I knew too well. Who are you?"

"Sir Reynard D'Cey," he replied, "Chevalier de l'Étoile, et le Baron Cey d'Cey — at your service." The titles were forfeit, but the feeling lingered.

"You are far from home, Monsieur le Baron." Amused by male formality, she bore down lightly on the last word, knowing the title had to be hollow.

"No knight is far from home who serves a fair lady." A minstrel's line, but he meant it. This woman had been lovely and regal, with hordes of unkept gallants vying for her favor. Now she faced arrant bullying by the likes of Alexi D'Medved.

Not the least fooled, but nonetheless pleased, Lady Ukhova invited him up off his knees. "Rise, Monsieur le Baron. No doubt you sing sweetly for your supper."

She led him up narrow stone stairs and across an upper drawbridge into the keep. Attackers who got past the lower bridge and both portcullises would find themselves trapped in the courtyard, raked by fire from the battlements. Markovites thought devils lurked in thresholds, refusing to kiss or even shake hands through a doorway. Any serf's hovel had its hand-carved trolls watching over the clay stoop. Kara Zamak merely took such precautions to extremes — unless they had something extraordinary to fear.

D'Cey saw an assailant had already breached the walls. At the base of the courtyard steps a patch of iron weeds poked up between the flagstones, sprouting from solid bedrock.

High atop the gatehouse sat an octagonal banquet hall, its carved rafters decorated with dusty battle flags and cooing doves. Painted archways spattered with bird droppings led to mural chambers and spiral stairs. Stretched above the fireplace was a huge leopard-skin, its bared fangs grinning evilly at D'Cey. Alongside hung a silver-chased hunting crossbow with silken strings, a velvet quiver, and silver-headed quarrels. Dwarfs scurried about, serving up sturgeon roe, pickled tongue, quail eggs,

and capons in lemon and saffron — the first civilized breakfast D'Cey had seen since coming to Markovy. But the giant leopard-skin above the mantel was an unwelcome reminder that he had spent the night in a cold iron tree.

A tall butler in be-ribboned garters seated him beside Lady Ukhova's half-sister, Lady Oghul, a full-blooded Kazak who spoke no French. She had dark crafty eyes framed by straight black hair that hung all the way to the floor. The result was a lively three-sided conversation, half in French, half in Kazak — with Lady Ukhova translating. Between them on the dining table lay a great gilded fleece with gold horns.

"Was it a big leopard?" inquired Lady Ukhova.

"Not that big." D'Cey nodded at the leopard-skin on the wall. The beast that killed Alexi had been middling at best — the tiger-sized cat on the wall could have had it for supper.

"Only one leopard is that big." Lady Ukhova spoke as if the skin were alive. Lady Oghul wanted to know what brought D'Cey to Kara Zamak.

"Whatever plans Lord Alexi D'Medved had are moot," D'Cey admitted — an agreeable turn of events from the way the women tittered over the translation. "As for me, I first must sleep. Then I mean to track down the cat that killed him."

This ambition provoked scornful amusement. "Alexi D'Medved was a noxious irritant," Lady Ukhova explained. "The cat who killed him has our utmost sympathy."

D'Cey spread sturgeon roe on black bread with his thumb. "But it will not insult you if I hunt him?"

Both laughed, inviting him to try. "Do your best — it is a devil-cat."

"Lord Alexi scoffed at that notion," D'Cey observed.

"And see where it got him," replied Lady Ukhova primly. "There is no fighting the power of the Iron Wood. My husband tried and it killed him. When I came here as a girl you could not make out the trees from the keep roof; now they surround us on three sides."

"Devil or not, I must make the attempt," D'Cey told them. "In a day or so, Count D'Medved himself will be here. I mean to present him with the leopard that killed his nephew."

All smiles ceased. The women traded anguished looks. They had no way of knowing that he and Alexi D'Medved were merely an advance

party. He complimented the sturgeon eggs, "Delicious stuff. What do you call this?"

"Caviar," replied Lady Ukhova dryly. Clearly neither woman welcomed a call from Count D'Medved. Nor did he blame them. There being no Lord Ukhova — no living one anyway — they had no natural protector. At least he gave them warning.

D'Cey licked fish eggs off his fingers. "Paris would go wild for this, particularly with champagne." Bringing back a barrel or two would easily redeem him at court. But first sleep. Surfeited on quail eggs and pickled tongue, he begged somewhere to lie down. Lady Oghul led him up some spiral stairs to a bed chamber hung with animal heads — Lord Ukhova had been an avid huntsman. His canopied bed had a squirrel-skin coverlet, but the sheets beneath were satin. D'Cey was asleep the moment his head touched the velvet pillow.

He awoke staring into the dead face of a long-nosed steppe antelope, thinking he was in some ghastly waking dream. Sitting bolt upright he remembered where he was, and what he had to do. Soon he would be facing Count D'Medved. That meeting would go much better if D'Cey had something to show him besides a dead nephew.

Clean linens and a green silk surcoat were laid out for him. Dressing swiftly, he pulled on his mail shirt and buckled his steel gorget about his neck, then descended to the banquet hall, begging leave to go. Lady Ukhova gave indifferent permission. Whistling up a couple of crossbowmen, he rode down the dusty path to the kill site. It was the hottest part of the day, and the Iron Wood gave no shade. Heat reflected mercilessly off the metal trunks.

Dismounting, he went carefully over the area around the cave, finding the baked-hard ground too firm to take prints. A single bloody paw mark confirmed his original impression of a smallish leopard, probably young and vigorous. Somewhat strange. Man-eaters tended to be older cats unable to take normal prey. He stood up, taking a deep breath of scorching air.

From overhead he heard the beat of wings and a rattle like hail. Looking up at the chalk white sky, he saw a flock of crows settling into the branches above him, claws clattering on the iron bark. Scores of black carrion eaters squawked to one another, eyeing him boldly. Hardly a welcome omen.

As he remounted the crows took off, rising like smoke into the hot chalk sky. From the saddle he saw another great mob of ill-armed men storming up the road from the village, dangerously agitated, trailing tearful women and frightened children — alarming even the Iron Wood crows. Chaos and confusion ensued. Jabbering serfs surrounded his horse, shouting demands D'Cey could not understand. He had hoped to somehow communicate with his crossbowmen, then question the serfs through them. Instead an angry jostling crowd trod on each other's toes, waving makeshift weapons and yelling at him in gibberish, pointing excitedly at the leopard on his shield.

Amid the babble, someone behind him inquired in passable French, "Can I help you?" Startled, D'Cey twisted in the saddle, seeing a glowering Kazak in leather and mail sitting atop a stocky pony, a bow slung across his back and a heavy mace hanging from his saddle. His presence created a clear space in the crowd, even the most hysterical serf giving him ample room.

It took a second to realize that this grotesque nomad had not spoken. Alongside his pony stood a slim black-haired girl in a velvet dress, wearing a silver comb with a spray of pearls. Her luminous almond eyes exactly matched those of Lady Ukhova. She asked again, "May I be of assistance?"

Taken aback, D'Cey saw this was the "marriageable daughter" Alexi had mentioned — the heiress the D'Medveds hoped to annex. Standing in the shade of the Kazak, she did not look much above twelve or so.

Swinging out of the saddle, he dropped to one knee. "Sir Reynard Cey D'Cey, at your service." It felt awkward bowing to a half-grown girl, but he meant to be on everyone's good side.

"Call me Klara," she told him, motioning him to rise. "Please forgive my people. They have never seen a French baron before. Or any foreigner not a Kazak or Tartar. They think you a demon. They don't know whether to fall down and worship you, or stone you to death."

D'Cey thanked her, saying, "Alas, neither alternative meets my needs at the moment."

Reaching out a slim finger, she traced the sleeping leopard on his shield. "You are the leopard hunter?" He heard the same scorn her mother had shown, tinged with childish awe.

"Today I am — though it is not my normal calling." Gentleman of

leisure was more his mark. "I prefer to hunt something harmless and tasty. Ducks perhaps, though I have lately become fond of fish eggs." No plate of caviar ever bit back.

"But you are hunting one now," she sounded accusing.

"Only because he is hunting us. Which is why I need to ask these people if there is a man-killer about."

She switched from French to Markovite. At her first word the mob turned meek. From her tone D'Cey could tell she did not speak down to the serfs the way Alexi had — they were "her people." She sounded marvelously condescending, her face softening as she heard them out. Children took lordship so seriously, naturally believing in *noblesse oblige*. Cynicism came with age.

She turned back to D'Cey, big eyes brimming with tears. "It is so very sad," she told him. "There has been a killing — just now. A woman this time. Her cowardly husband sent her to gather firewood. Men heard her screams and saw the leopard run her down. She was young. Not much older than I, and newly married."

Her tears touched him. D'Cey had never seen a Markovite give a moldy fig for some hapless serf woman — much less cry over one. He asked to see where it happened. Klara lifted her velvet skirt and they trooped off over untended fields toward the new kill site, trailed by the crowd.

Nothing so far prepared D'Cey for what came next. Flies buzzed in the heat. Ahead lay the abandoned orchard where the girl-bride had been gathering sticks. Rows of rotting fruit lying between lanes of trees made the broiling air smell syrupy. Before they made the trees, a slight blonde-haired figure emerged, crawling half-naked on hands and knees. It was the victim — her clothing ripped from her upper body, and blood flowing down her face.

Everyone dashed forward, all shouting at once. Men yelled and pointed, demanding D'Cey to do something. Heaven knows what. Klara's sadness turned to sudden fury. Screaming at the serfs, she called them names, scolding and stamping her slippered foot. That silenced them. They fell full out on the ground, groveling in abject fear, scrambling to kiss the hem of her dress. D'Cey remembered the stake and breaking wheel at the castle gate. Here even a child had better be feared.

Klara turned to him, angry and imperious, eyes blazing. "They say she

will surely die. They want to carry her back to where she was attacked, so you can wait over her for the leopard. I said I would see them all bound, blinded, and flogged to death first."

Admirable sentiments, if a trifle extreme. D'Cey knelt beside the mauled serf girl, who heard the whole debate. Her blue eyes wide with fear and shock — she looked at best about fourteen. Blood from a huge scalp wound flowed down her cheek and neck into the soft hollow between her breasts. Gritting his teeth, he told Klara, "Have them get back. Give her room to breathe. Tell the women to bring hot water — boiling if possible."

Shooing the frightened men away, Klara rapped orders to the women. D'Cey stripped off his gorget, silk surcoat, and chain mail, to get at his clean linen shirt. He ripped the gift undershirt into long strips to use as bandages. Women returned with water that was barely tepid. Serfs had gone for days with only twigs to feed their fires. D'Cey decided it had to do.

Claw marks ran in red furrows down the girl's back. Her scalp wound went from her forehead clear to the nape of the neck. She said the leopard grabbed her from behind as she ran, jerking her backward. Deep puncture wounds in her neck showed where the big cat seized her in his jaws and bit down, miraculously missing her spine and jugular. At that point the girl fainted, giving herself up for dead. The leopard must have thought so too, because he dropped her and departed. Happy with his kill, but not particularly hungry.

D'Cey had an Arab potion passed down in his family to treat big cat bites and slashes. After washing the wounds with the lukewarm water, he poured the better part of the bottle over them. Liquid ran in one neck wound and out another. Having cleaned the wounds as best he could, he bound them with strips of shirt. When he was done, he stood up, saying, "This is why I must kill that leopard."

Klara shot him an angry look. "Kill him? That is ridiculous. How could you ever hope to?"

D'Cey pulled his mail shirt back on, its steel links felt cool against his bare chest. "Have them bring me a goat and I will show you."

The girl ordered up a goat. While they waited, D'Cey told how his family in Gascony had learned the art of breeding big cats from the Arabs — "I have raised them from cubs. Big leopards like you have here, and the

small swift ones called cheetahs." He knew their habits and could imitate their cries — "Though not well enough to fool them." Klara remained unimpressed.

The goat arrived and D'Cey walked the bleating animal back to the original kill site at the edge of the Iron Wood. He staked the goat in the path the leopard had used, rigging a trap with the crossbow he picked up the night before and the two his bowmen had brought. Tying the bows to metal trunks, he set them to fire from three directions right at the goat, running trip lines from their triggers so the leopard could not get at the bait without firing at least one of the bows. Then he fixed a slack line to the goat stake. Leopards did not like to dine on the spot. If this one somehow got past the trip lines, pulling off the carcass would fire all three bows at once.

Klara ridiculed the arrangement. "Bows won't kill a ghost cat."

D'Cey shrugged. "Any leopard real enough to kill a man, savage a girl, or eat a goat can be done in by crossbows." He went over the ground on hands and knees, making sure there was nothing to alert the leopard — not a heel print, not so much as an overturned leaf. Satisfied that even a ghost leopard would find nothing amiss with this meal, he stood up, telling Klara, "Warn your people not to touch any of this."

An unnecessary precaution. Stealing a crossbow, or molesting a lord's goat, could get a serf impaled. If the devil-cat did not track him down first. Common sense and superstitious awe would keep them well away from the kill site. Klara watched the unwilling sacrifice bleat and tug at its stake, saying, "Think what it must be like."

"Being staked out and eaten?" D'Cey doubted it felt good. But if he did not get his cat Lord D'Medved would make *him* into a scapegoat — which could easily be even less pleasant.

"No," Klara shook her head. "What must it be like to catch living food in your teeth. To bite down on a goat's throat and feel hot blood spurt into your mouth. To strip raw reeking flesh from the bone." Charming thoughts in a half-grown girl. Far from pitying the goat, she put herself in the leopard's place — but Markovites never pretended to be civilized.

Klara insisted on taking the mauled girl home, saying the husband forfeited any claim to her by sending her to gather sticks, then leaving her to the leopard. D'Cey noted that the man was unarmed. Klara snorted,

"Would that stop you? Would you stand by and see a helpless girl carried off?" An uncomfortable question, as Klara well knew. D'Cey could only say he hoped not to be put to that test.

Back at Kara Zarnak he enjoyed a sumptuous feast washed down with an exceptionally decent Bordeaux. As much as he sympathized with the serfs — huddled hungry and defenseless in their unlit hovels while a man-eater stalked outside — there was still an indolent satisfaction in picking minced quail from his teeth with a jeweled pick worth more than a commoner earned in a lifetime. Vastly superior to living on beet roots and stiff beatings.

Lady Ukhova even let him play his lyre for the first time since coming to Markovy — where melodies made by anything but the human voice were mortal sins. Klara was not allowed to join them, to keep her from being corrupted by the music.

Afterward he went to check on the wounded serf-girl, finding her asleep. Klara sat beside the bed wearing a long embroidered silk chemise, carefully cleaning the wounds. D'Cey could not help being happy to see her, though she ought not to be alone with a lyre-playing heretic, and only a comatose serf for chaperon. Already there was an unspoken bond between them, doubtless due in part to her not having a father — better to learn something about men from a footloose French baron than to wait and be instructed by the D'Medveds.

He inquired after their patient. Klara responded with one of her cryptic shrugs. "She sleeps. And her wounds are not festering."

"When she wakes, see that she eats," D'Cey suggested. "And has bandages washed in boiling water."

She nodded dutifully, adding, "You know you will never get this leopard."

D'Cey raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Of course." She gave a pitying look. "Any traps you set are bound to fail." Less distant and regal than her mother, Klara could be twice as nettlesome. No wonder the D'Medveds meant to whip the Ukhova women into obedience — they must make difficult neighbors. "These devil-cats are a special curse on our family," she told him. "You have seen the leopard-skin above the mantel?"

"How could I miss it?"

"My father went into the Iron Wood and killed that Khan among cats. Ever since, its spirit has haunted us. It killed my father, and will not rest until we are all consumed, including me. I am the last of the line, and a daughter only — all our sons are dead." D'Cey observed that she seemed curiously unmoved by this impending doom. She gave another cryptic shrug. "I have lived with it all my life."

He shook his head. "Why don't you cut it to pieces?"

"The devil-cat?" She laughed. "We would have to catch it first. Father died trying."

"No, that leopard-skin above the mantle. I would not have it hanging over my head."

Klara smirked. "And you say you know leopards. That skin is our only claim on the cat's power. Destroying it would leave us defenseless."

D'Cey had no ready answer. Taking a long look at him, she inquired sweetly, "Is it true you are a eunuch?"

"That is no proper question for a girl your age."

"Then it is true?" Klara sounded triumphant.

D'Cey fought an unknighly impulse to turn her over his knee. Which could easily be what the child wanted — it was probably years since she was properly spanked. If ever. All the best manuscripts on child rearing recommended regular beatings. Klara could certainly use a couple. "I merely shave my face," he told her. "Many foreigners do."

"May I watch?"

"Absolutely not." Disliking the tone of the conversation, D'Cey bade her good-bye and departed — a gentleman's toilet was a personal matter between him and his valet.

Water clocks chimed Compline, and D'Cey retired to the family library. The Ukhovas had a great trove of illuminated manuscripts in Cyrillic, Greek, and even French and Latin, including beautiful copies of Froissart's *Chronicles*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and Christine de Pisan's *La Cité des Dames*. Long summer twilights let him read late into the night — winters here must be black indeed. He took a copy of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* back to his bedroom. Opening at random, he found himself in the middle of Book IX. The adventures of Launcelot, Lamorak, Tristram, and La Belle Isoud soon put him to sleep.

He was awakened by a dog barking. Swinging out of bed, he bounded

up to the wall walk. A little hairy mop of a dog stood balanced in an embrasure, barking furiously. The moon was up, and a night breeze was blowing from the direction of the kill site. The dog had seen or smelled something.

D'Cey nearly broke his neck dashing back down the dark steps. Pulling on his mail shirt, he fixed his gorget around his throat, and struggled into his boots. Up on the battlements the dog kept on barking. Grabbing a boar spear off the wall, he stuffed a tinderbox and wax tapers into his belt pouch. It was useless to order out the bowmen — no right-thinking Markovite hunted devil-cats in the dark. But if the leopard was wounded by the crossbows, he dearly hoped to finish the beast off.

Bounding back up to the battlements, he scooped up the dog, who continued to bark excitedly. Carrying it down to the courtyard, he ordered startled Kazaks to open the gate — requiring a flurry of hand signals, and further delay. Once outside he set the dog on its feet, and they raced together down the footpath.

D'Cey slowed as he approached the kill site, letting the dog go ahead. The goat was gone. Lighting a taper, he checked the crossbows and trip lines. All three bows had been fired, but no bolt had hit the leopard. Each bow had been nudged from behind to slacken the trip lines, then discharged harmlessly into the ground. After taking its time disarming the bows, the devil-cat had made off with the doomed goat.

The little dog kept barking his head off, wanting to follow the leopard into the Iron Wood. D'Cey picked the dog up, saying, "You're braver than I," then trudged back to the keep, thoroughly defeated. Malory lay open on his bed. The first lines of the upcoming chapter read:

"And then there came the good Sir Palomides, following the Questing Beast that had a head like a serpent, feet like a hart, buttocks like a lion, and a body like a leopard...."

Perfect. He felt just like the wandering ill-fated Palomides, chasing a will-o'-the-wisp with the body of a leopard and a brain equal to his. Snuffing out his taper, D'Cey threw himself full out onto the bed, falling instantly asleep, still in his boots.

At first light he returned to collect the crossbows. On his way down

the dusty path he came upon his boot prints from the night before, headed the other way. On top of his own prints he saw the pug marks of a medium-sized leopard, following him up the path as he made his weary way back to Kara Zamak. The devil-cat that killed Alexi had started stalking him.

Count D'Medved

AT DUSK D'CEY stood on the wall walk seeing a line of cavalry come over the steppe, tiny plumes of dull gold dust dwarfed by immense darkening plain. Despite the fading light he knew they were cavalry by the easy way they ate up ground. Farther back came a bigger cloud that could be wagons. By nightfall they would be at the gate.

Lady Ukhova herself came to look, done up to meet her doom in ermine and cloth-of-silver. D'Cey feared he would not cut half so good a figure. "You don't have to let them in," he suggested. Kara Zamak's defenses were magnificent, and her Kazaks seemed tolerably loyal. Lady Ukhova gave him a cold glance, not anxious to share her plans with D'Cey.

If the mother would not — maybe the daughter would. Descending the stone stairs, he found Klara tending the wounded serf, a task she plainly relished. Changing bandages, administering potions, dictating the young woman's toilet and diet, all fed Klara's sense of control. An absolute necessity now that armed men were coming to tear her away from her family, forcing her into marriage with a yet unnamed D'Medved. Seeing him enter, she put down her bowl and spoon. "Why have you come?"

"To see how you are faring."

Klara laughed mirthlessly. "What if a stranger was on his way to seize you, coming to drag you off to his bed, to strip you naked and force his sweaty body on you, whether you willed it or not? Beating you into obedience. How would you feel?"

D'Cey grimaced. Not a troubadour's version of true love. "I suppose I would fight it."

"Just so." Klara turned back to her puzzled patient, who listened to the whole heated exchange in French. How much choice had she had in her marriage? Not much, D'Cey supposed. But serfs were born to be someone's property. This whole interlude must be amazingly unreal to

her — mauled by a leopard, miraculously saved, lodged in a castle bed swathed in silks, hand-fed by a young noble woman — a real-life faerie tale.

He started to ask how Klara intended to fight — but before he could Lady Oghul bustled in, smiling and speaking Kazak. Klara's eyes widened, her face broke into a grin. Whatever the news, it was good. "What's she saying?" D'Cey demanded.

"It is not the D'Medveds," Klara crowed happily, looking for once like a child should. "Aunt Ghul says get ready to greet Prince Sergey, Grand Duke of Ikstra."

Racing back up to the wall walk, D'Cey peered out an embrasure. Aunt "Ghul" was right; the riders below wore the embattled blue bend of Royal Horse Guards — not the D'Medved *martlet* Or. An unbelievable reprieve. Behind the Horse Guards came Prince Sergey's baggage wagons, big gilt-covered gypsy caravans trimmed in royal blue. What had been a siege had become a party, giving him one more day to get his leopard.

Returning to his room, he changed into a crimson surcoat laid out on his bed. In a castle run by women he need never worry over his wardrobe. Strapping on his sword, he went down to greet the Grand Duke. D'Cey had met Prince Sergey Mikhailovich in the capital — a tall aging courtier who dressed like a peacock and spoke pitiful French — half-brother to King Demitri, third in line for the throne of Markovy. At home he might have made a decent bailiff on some provincial estate; here he was Grand Duke of Ikstra, Baron Suzdal, and holder of a dozen lesser titles.

At the upper drawbridge he let Klara and Lady Oghul go ahead of him. He could not see Prince Sergey in the torchlit court. Doubtless the old Duke was lodged in one of the bullock wagons, which were sumptuously outfitted, like drawing rooms on wheels. Lady Ukhova waited below, with a Horse Guards Captain down on one knee before her, his plumed helm held in the crook of his arm.

Reaching out, D'Cey seized Klara's shoulder, swiftly spinning the girl around. He hissed, "Have your Kazaks drop the portcullises and lift the lower drawbridge."

Klara's look turned from surprise to shock. Nothing if not quick, she dashed back into the gatehouse. Pushing past Lady Oghul, D'Cey descended into the courtyard, loosening his sword.

He heard the bullock wagons rumble onto the lower drawbridge as he

strode over to where Lady Ukhova stood, with the knight in Horse Guards colors kneeling before her. "Your ladyship," he called out, nodding casually at the stairs, "your daughter needs you within."

She shot him a questioning look. The man at her feet tried to rise, but D'Cey had his sword out and at the man's throat, advising him, "Don't get up on my account."

With a crash the inner portcullis came rattling down, catching the lead bullock wagon as it came off the drawbridge. Reinforced beams with ironshod points crunched through the gilded cart, splitting it all the way to the axle. Bullocks bellowed, and men tumbled out of the splintered wagon — they had little gold birds stitched on their tunics, the D'Medved yellow martlet.

Cursing, the Guard Captain scrambled backward onto his feet, saying, "Damn you D'Cey. What are you doing?" He was a guard captain — but not Prince Sergey's. He was a D'Medved man-at-arms, one who owed D'Cey money.

D'Cey could have cut him down, but bloodshed now would spark a full out battle — and cancel any chance of collecting his debt. Instead D'Cey put his back to the stairs, covering Lady Ukhova's retreat. A half-dozen men-at-arms in Horse Guards colors rushed up to defend their bogus captain. Above them, Kazak archers drew bow — but would not likely fire with Lady Ukhova in the courtyard. D'Cey glanced at the gate and saw the second caravan jammed under the outer portcullis, its weight keeping the drawbridge from rising. The whole intricate gate mechanism was neatly foiled.

Like a devil emerging from the threshold, a middle-aged brigand in armor separated himself from the wrecked bullock cart, ducking under the portcullis. Count D'Medved had a bald pate and a big black beard. He drank too much and laughed too loud, but had a low keen wit to go with his upcountry manners, and could be fiendish clever at times — like now. Straightening up, he strode over to where D'Cey stood facing a half-dozen of his men disguised as Horse Guards. D'Medved made a mock bow. "Monsieur le Baron, we meet again."

D'Cey saluted him with his sword, "At your service."

"Would it were so." D'Medved's smile was all beard and teeth. "I expected better of you."

"And I expected Prince Sergey."

D'Medved laughed wickedly. "The Grand Duke is detained — affairs of state and such. I came in his place. I hear that my nephew Alexi is dead, and his body used to bait a leopard?"

"I was trying catch his killer."

"Yet yesterday you refused to use a serf the same way?" Count D'Medved appeared alarmingly well informed.

D'Cey pointed out that Alexi was dead, "While the serf woman is still very much alive."

"So?" D'Medved looked askance at him, totally puzzled. His nephew was worth any number of serfs, alive or dead. D'Cey saw he had no defense for his actions, except his sword.

"She was my serf." Lady Ukhova spoke up, standing at the foot of the stairs. "I would not let him use her as bait."

"Is that so?" D'Medved turned to the woman he came to intimidate. He did not look convinced, indeed he probably knew better, but merely waved absently to his men. "Disarm him. We can deal with Monsieur le Baron later."

D'Cey hefted his sword. He had seen Markovite executions, with the condemned hauled naked to the breaking wheel in a dung cart drawn by swine. Better to die blade in hand. But Lady Ukhova would not let him make a brave scene. Stepping between them, she told him, "Put down your sword and leave us — the Count and I must talk." D'Cey lowered his blade, letting D'Medved's men wrench it from his hand. "Go," she insisted, tilting her head toward the gatehouse steps. "See to my daughter."

D'Cey went. Dying in that courtyard would have done no one any good — least of all him. Though heaven knows what good he could do in the gatehouse. At the upper drawbridge, he looked back to see Lady Ukhova facing down D'Medved and his men. How long could that brave front last? D'Medved would demand nothing short of total surrender.

Flames lit the banquet hall. Klara stood before an unseasonal roaring fire, her back to him, feeding something into the flames. He hurried over, afraid the girl meant to harm herself; instead he found her calmly stuffing the huge leopard skin into the fireplace. As the stench of burning hair and hide filled the banquet hall, she straightened up, saying, "Now there is nothing left to save."

Nothing but their lives. D'Cey took down the hunting crossbow and its velvet quiver, an elegant silver-chased bow cocked by a winding-crank built into the stock. Cranking back the cord, he slipped a silver-headed quarrel into place. At best he had one shot — he would never have time to recrank the bow. But how to use his single shot? He could not picture himself just shooting Count D'Medved. Not when his guards were right there, ready to take revenge.

Boots rang on the narrow courtyard steps. Klara vanished up spiral stairs into the floor above. D'Cey beat a retreat into the nearest mural chamber. Finding a wall niche, half-hidden behind a tapestry, he slipped into it, whispering a fervid prayer to the Virgin, begging Her blessed intervention. Nothing short of a miracle would get him out of this alive and whole.

Lady Ukhova entered the banquet hall, calmly ordering wine for her "guests." D'Cey heard dwarfs scurrying about, keeping D'Medved's men happy. Servants raised the upper drawbridge. With the main gate blocked by the wrecked bullock carts, the upper bridge became the keep's last defense — not that it mattered a lot with D'Medved's men already inside. D'Cey waited, keeping the cocked crossbow in front of him.

Night fell. The niche he picked housed a tall arrow slit, the type vulgarly named for intimate female anatomy. Moonlight entered through the firing slit, falling onto the floor of the mural chamber, letting D'Cey mark the passage of time by watching it move over the carpeted floor. Weariness crept over him. Sitting slumped in the niche, clutching his crossbow, he glumly listened to drunken feasting in the banquet hall — a party he should be part of if there were any justice in the world. He started to doze.

Suddenly a new sound jerked him awake. It was well past midnight by his makeshift clock. On the landing that led to the upper drawbridge, a dog had begun to bark.

Hairs rose on the back of his neck. Through the arrow slit he could see a thin slice of darkened courtyard, half in moonlight, half in shadow. He did not need to see into those dense shadows to know what had happened. With the gate defenses disabled, the devil-cat had entered Kara Zamak.

Slipping out of his niche, he moved toward the mural chamber's open archway. Drinking sounds grew more raucous. Through the archway he

saw D'Medved sitting at the head of the table, with Lady Ukhova beside him, keeping his goblet filled. Above the boyar's head was the huge bare spot where the leopard skin had been.

Outside he could hear the dog barking his head off. The leopard was moving invisibly in the darkness, easily able to leap the gap at the upper drawbridge. When that happened their only warning would be the little dog dashing into the banquet hall, tail tucked between his legs, the devil-cat hot on his heels.

Flattening himself against the stonework, D'Cey had a good view of D'Medved and Lady Ukhova, but could not see the door to the landing that the dog would come flying through. He checked the tension on his crossbow. If the leopard was coming for Lady Ukhova, the dog would give him enough warning to get off a shot. Too bad Count D'Medved sat next to her. If the leopard was coming for him, D'Cey hated to waste a quarrel.

There was no warning. No frightened dog dashed into the banquet hall. As D'Medved happily raised a goblet to his lips, an amber streak burst from the foot of the spiral stairwell leading to the upper apartments. There was no time for a shot. Before the startled Count could set down his cup, the cat was on him. Borne backward, the drunken boyar crashed down behind the table with the leopard atop him, his chair shattering as he hit.

Servants shrieked. Dwarfs scattered in terror. D'Medved lay thrashing on the floor with the snarling beast tearing at his throat. Drunken guardsmen tried to leap up and draw their swords without tripping over the table. Shouts of "My God!" and "What ho!" and "Treason!" filled the flag-draped hall. Only Lady Ukhova seemed unperturbed. Picking up D'Medved's fallen goblet, she poured herself more wine, laughing wildly as the leopard savaged the unwanted guest at her feet.

D'Medved's men-at-arms charged the head of the table, chasing the leopard off their master. As the beast let go, the boyar flopped onto his back, bleeding profusely from the neck. Only immediate attention could save him, but D'Cey could see he would not get any. His guards were busy taking drunken swipes at the leopard, who easily avoided them. Dwarfs and servants cowered in the corners. And none of the castle women were going to leap to D'Medved's aid.

Somehow D'Cey had to turn the commotion to his advantage. The boyar who had threatened him was busily bleeding to death by the fire. Set

to take "French leave" — if he only had somewhere to go — D'Cey glanced at the doorway leading to the courtyard. A little mop of a dog come yapping into the hall, eyes wide, tail between his legs. D'Cey leveled his crossbow, bracing himself for what was about to happen. Only Lady Ukhova seemed to notice. She stopped laughing and set down her goblet, looking terrified.

Bursting into the hall behind the dog was the biggest leopard D'Cey had ever seen, a tiger-sized male twice as big as the first cat. He took the guardsmen totally by surprise, landing on the back of one, knocking him down and scattering the others. Drunken courage evaporated. When it had been six of them against a single smallish leopard, the guardsmen had liked the odds. Now they were five, facing two cats, one of them huge, and both blindingly fast. Dragging their fallen comrade, they retreated to the mural chambers, dwarfs and servants cowering behind them.

Having driven the humans to cover, the two cats started hissing and swatting at each other. Clearly overmatched, the smaller leopard backed, turned, and bounded up the spiral stairway, with the big male in hot pursuit.

D'Cey saw at once what he had to do. With his bow in front of him, he dashed up the stairs after the two cats. He had eaten Lady Ukhova's bread — spread with caviar no less — and worn her colors, now he must do his best to lift the curse on her house. He caught up with the leopards at the first landing, still snarling and swiping at each other. Seeing him appear, the smaller leopard backed down the hall toward the open door of Lady Oghul's room. The big male leaped after her — making it plain what he had in mind.

D'Cey's own room was next to the landing. He ducked inside, snapping on his gorget and grabbing up the boar spear. He could hear the cats just down the hall, hissing and snarling. D'Cey took a deep breath. This is it. Make your shot count, then be ready with the boar spear.

Stepping into the hall, he brought the crossbow to his shoulder. The big male had the smaller leopard backed all the way into Lady Oghul's room, but could not force his way through the narrow door. As the spotted monster arched his back, D'Cey took aim. With no clear shot at the head or chest, he went for the spine, just back of the shoulder blades. Saying a soft prayer to St. Denis, he squeezed the silver trigger lever.

And missed. As the bow fired, the big cat spun about to face this new

threat. The silver-headed quarrel buried itself in the beast's ribs. Fangs out, the wounded leopard sprang straight at D'Cey. Flung over backward, he managed to get the boar spear in front of him, but the big cat bounded over him and disappeared up the spiral stairs.

Staggering to his feet, D'Cey threw himself against the door to Lady Oghul's room, slamming it shut, trapping the smaller leopard inside. He felt the cat thud against the door, then slap at the latch. Angry and smart. If he let go she would be out in no time. Fortunately the crossbow's velvet quiver had a pouch containing spare quarrel points and bowstrings. Leaning against the door, he managed to extract a string and tie down the latch.

One cat down, one to go. Stepping away from the door, he cranked back the bow and slid another quarrel into place. He could hear the trapped leopard banging against the door. Satisfied she could not escape, he picked up the boar spear and sprinted for the stairs — determined to get a second shot at her would-be mate.

Blood on the stairs told him the wounded cat had headed up to the battlements, not back down to the banquet hall. He took the steps two at a time, crossbow in one hand, boar spear in the other. Half way up he came on a Kazak lying sprawled head down on the steps. Stone dead, having fallen from somewhere above — a sure sign the wounded devil-cat was still dangerous. Not that D'Cey ever doubted it.

Stepping over the dead Kazak, D'Cey continued more gingerly, watching each step. He could hear the little castle dog barking somewhere above. First light came falling down the stairwell as the short summer night faded. D'Cey stopped at the final twist in the stair. The opening at the head of the stairs formed a big dazzling square of light overhead. Dawn was not far off, and the castle dog continued to bark. He took another step, edging closer to the opening above.

Something dark and shining fell past his cheek, splatting onto his glove. He looked down and saw blood. There was more of it on the step at his feet. As he watched, another gleaming drop hit his boot. Someone was bleeding just above him.

This was a wounded leopard trick, doubling back to lie up over his own spoor. Pointing the cocked crossbow at the square of light, D'Cey began to back up the stairwell. The devil-cat would be waiting just behind

the lip of the opening, tracking him by the scrape of his boots. Only the chance fall of blood had revealed the ambush.

When he reached the top steps, D'Cey doubled his legs beneath him, getting ready to spring. He took a deep purposeful breath. Then he leaped the last two steps, firing at the black shape lying in wait above the opening.

It was another dead Kazak, face down in a spreading pool of blood. There was no sign of the leopard. Which was good since D'Cey had wasted a shot, putting a silver-headed quarrel into one of Lady Ukhova's late retainers. Cursing his stupidity, he frantically cranked the crossbow. He thought he would not have time to re crank it — now he seemed to be doing nothing else.

Slipping a quarrel into the bow, he surveyed the gatehouse battlements. Dawn was coming up. The two sentries on duty were dead. The little dog stood perched on the southern parapet, barking his head off. He at least would not mistake a dead Kazak for a leopard lying in wait.

D'Cey slid over to see what the dog was barking at. Peering past the parapet, he saw an empty stretch of curtain wall connecting the gatehouse to an adjacent tower. Drawing back, he studied the parapet, finding a patch of blood on the stone. This had to be leopard blood. The devil-cat had gone over the parapet, which meant he had to follow. There was no door or stair leading from the gatehouse to the curtain wall walk — so if an enemy breached the curtain they could not get into the gatehouse. Access to the wall walk was through a door in the adjacent tower.

Looking about for some way down, he saw the nearest dead Kazak had a lariat around his waist. D'Cey disliked robbing the dead — but in this case he was just borrowing. He anchored the rope to the battlement, then tossed the free end down to the wall walk. Tucking the boar spear under his arm, he picked up the little dog, then swung his legs over the parapet. Keeping one hand on the rope, and clutching the dog, spear, and crossbow, D'Cey lowered himself over the lip of the parapet.

Halfway down, he slipped, losing his hold on the rope. He dropped the last dozen feet, coming down hard, and wrenching an ankle. Cursing mightily, he managed to get the crossbow pointed down the wall walk. But there was no sign of the leopard, just a long line of shadowy embrasures, each with a little wing wall for Kazak archers to hide behind. The leopard could be waiting in any one of them.

Setting down the dog, D'Cey could see that the far door was closed, and no doubt barred from within. Men milled about in the courtyard below. On the far side of the curtain lay the deep rocky ravine choked with iron-spiked trees. That left only the shadowy line of embrasures — unless the devil-cat somehow sprouted wings.

The dog took off down the wall walk, barking to wake the dead. Either brave or brainless — which were often hard to tell apart. D'Cey limped after the foolhardy canine, keeping the crossbow leveled and the boar spear ready. Short on sleep, with no supper, he hoped to end this swiftly. And happily.

D'Cey did not have far to limp. Hearing a thin rasping hiss from behind one of the embrasures, he saw the dog start to dance wildly about. Saying a swift Hail Mary, D'Cey dodged around the short wing wall, crossbow in hand, the boar spear held in the crook of an elbow. The biggest leopard he had ever seen sat crouched in the embrasure, back to the dawn sky, swatting at the dog with one paw.

As soon as he appeared the leopard froze, forgetting the dog, giving D'Cey a look of primal hate and contempt. Dawn broke behind the beast, gleaming on metal treetops. Only the dog's demented barking shattered the morning silence. Aiming at a rosette right atop the devil-cat's chest, D'Cey slowly squeezed the trigger lever.

That slight movement provoked a leap. Had he waited to see where the quarrel hit, D'Cey would have been dead. As soon as he fired, he let go of the bow. Couching the boar spear like a lance, he drove it into the charging devil-cat. He had been quick, but not near as quick as the cat. Twisting in midair, the leopard took the point in the shoulder, crashing into D'Cey. Hissing and snarling, the beast came right up the spear shaft, slashing at his tormentor.

Only the crossbar on the boar spear saved D'Cey. Had the point gone deeper, the leopard would have been on him, tearing at his face. Bracing his boot against the short inner parapet, D'Cey screamed aloud, throwing every ounce of being behind the spear. Catching the leopard off balance, he shoved the devil-cat back into the embrasure. Claws scraped on stone — but could not hold. D'Cey flung the leopard through the open embrasure into empty space.

Letting go of the spear shaft, he watched the huge cat cartwheel into

the ravine below, taking the boar spear with him. The beast hit the base of the curtain, bounced outward, then disappeared among the black branches of the Iron Wood. D'Cey muttered a heartfelt, "*Au revoir.*"

He did not think for a moment that the devil-cat was dead — but hopefully it would not be back anytime soon. Picking up the crossbow, he patted the little dog on the rump, then hauled himself up the rope onto the gatehouse. Without bothering to reload the bow, he hobbled down the spiral stairs to Aunt Oghul's room. How many times had he been up or down these steps? Half a dozen at least between dusk and dawn. An absolutely ghastly night. The spare bowstring was still tying down the latch; untying it, he opened the door, betting a lot that he would not see a leopard.

He didn't. Sunlight slanted through high windows onto Klara sitting on her aunt's bed, wrapped in the fur coverlet but otherwise naked, her tear-stained eyes wide and staring. Flecks of dried blood clung to the corners of her mouth. More blood showed on her long sharp nails. He sat down on the bed beside her, saying, "I am sorry. I did not know."

She looked up at him. "Did not know what?"

"Well for one, that I was fixing crossbows to shoot at you."

She smirked. "Small chance they had of hitting anything."

"I did my best." What an imbecile he had been — pompously setting up his crossbows and trip lines, patiently explaining to this poor childish savage how he meant to trap her.

"It does not matter." She shrugged. "What of the devil-cat?"

"I sent him back to the Iron Wood — with a few new holes in his hide." D'Cey felt proud of himself, despite his twisted ankle and a couple of botched crossbow shots. He planned to turn the episode into a ballad. No proper poetic retelling need dwell on how he leaped at the sight of blood and shot a dead Kazak.

"He will return," Klara replied glumly, picking at the blood on her nails. D'Medved blood.

"Doubtless," D'Cey agreed. "But what about you?" he asked, trying to be as delicate as he could. "This thing that happens — it comes on only at night?"

She nodded, still staring moodily at her nails. "When the moon is up and near to full."

"How long has it been going on?" He struggled to remain politely ambiguous — there was simply no nice way of asking how long have you been changing into a she-leopard?

"It began this spring, along with my monthly flow."

Giving a whole new meaning to "the Curse." He shook his head in wonder. "So it was you in the cave the other night?"

She shuddered. "Yes. For the first few nights I stayed confined to the castle. But when the demon cat started calling to me, I could not resist. He meant to mate with me, and teach me to kill. But the villagers chased me into that cave. It was terrible. I spent a whole day huddled and naked in that hole, until night fell, and the moon rose, then I changed back...."

And Alexi D'Medved swaggered up, aiming to show everyone the hole was empty. D'Cey felt vaguely sorry for his former hosts. The D'Medveds had come to Kara Zamak expecting to swoop down on a castle full of women, enjoying a little honest rapine and plunder. Instead they got in the way of a deadly curse, falling prey to devil cats dueling over a haunted landscape. D'Cey sighed heavily. "And you have not killed anyone — aside from Count D'Medved and his nephew?"

"And your goat."

"Ah, yes, the goat — Well, it was not mine really, only borrowed." He had been made to look a fool too, but not as badly as the D'Medveds.

"It is only a matter of time." Klara shook her head miserably. "So long as that beast calls to me from the Iron Wood — a night will come when I am his, bearing his cubs and killing at his side. Then the family curse will be complete."

"There must be something we can do." He limped off to see her mother.

It was just his luck that the sole D'Medved retainer struck down by the devil-cat was the Guard Captain who owed him money — forever canceling that debt. But it put Lady Ukhova firmly back in command of her castle. None of D'Medved's guardsmen were bold enough to do more than haul home the bodies of Count D'Medved and their Guard Captain.

Servants were still scrubbing up blood in the banquet hall, so Lady Ukhova granted him an audience in her privy chamber. After receiving her thanks for ridding the castle of the devil-cat, D'Cey broached the delicate question of what to do about her daughter. Lord knows Klara was not his

problem, but he had become involved, and wanted to see something done for her. To save having risked his life for nothing.

"She must go away," the Lady of Kara Zamak decided. "I would rather live alone than let my last child be swallowed up by this evil. Besides, the D'Medveds will be back looking for her, once they find their count is dead."

D'Cey agreed there seemed to be no other choice.

"Will you take her?" Lady Ukhova asked.

"To where?" D'Cey could not picture himself returning to Paris, landless and penniless, with a pretty young leopard-child in tow. France was not ready for that. Nor was he. He had not planned to return at all — not until he had made his fortune.

"To Kazakistan. My cousins there will know what to do — being shamans and shape-changers themselves. They might even have a cure for her. Lady Oghul will go with you — to speak for you, and show the way."

D'Cey bowed low, "As you wish." He had small desire to head off into the dawn in search of Lady Ukhova's wandering relations — but he still less wanted to wait in Kara Zamak for the devil-cat to recover and the D'Medveds to return in force. Klara was even more reluctant, but after a tearful interview with her mother agreed to go — there truly being naught else to do. Soon she was showing a child's resilience, going through Black Castle, collecting things to take; her velvet dress and pearl spray comb, a prized pony, her favorite fetishes, and the little ragged dog.

They left the next morning at sunrise, D'Cey and a dozen mounted Kazaks escorting Aunt Ghul's yurt, and a small herd of cattle and remounts. Skirting the Iron Wood, they headed south toward the caravan route, the Silk Road that ran all the way to Far Cathay. D'Cey turned in the saddle for a final look at the dark stone castle rearing over the steppe, with cold iron trees crowding against its walls. He wondered how long it would take for the Iron Wood to swallow Kara Zamak completely.



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CURIOSITIES

THE THING IN THE WOODS, BY HARPER WILLIAMS (1924)

WILBUR Whateley, the monster in H. P. Lovecraft's classic "The Dunwich Horror," is a revolting composite of various animal species. But who would have thought that his pedigree includes a smidgen of velveteen rabbit?

In a 1924 letter, Lovecraft recounts a book-buying spree from which his buddy Frank Belknap Long brought home *The Thing in the Woods*, a "new" horror novel by Harper Williams. Lovecraft scholar S. T. Joshi has cited this potboiler about a werewolf and its slightly more human brother on the loose in rural Pennsylvania as a possible influence on Lovecraft's tale of an extradimensional entity and its slightly more human brother on the loose in rural New England. Bibliophiles have long presumed Williams an obscure American writer whose only novel was published in 1924. In fact, *The Thing in the Woods* was first published in

England in 1913, the fifth novel by Margery Williams, a British writer who spent her school years in Pennsylvania Dutch country. The American edition not only appeared under a pseudonym, modestly revised — it also failed to acknowledge that in 1922 Williams, under her married name, Bianco, published the children's classic, *The Velveteen Rabbit*.

The mind boggles at the alternate literary histories that could have resulted. Had Lovecraft been influenced by Williams's next book after *The Thing in the Woods*, might he have written a sentimental fantasy, "The Dunwich Hare"? Or what if Williams had pursued a career as a horror writer? The subtitle of her kids classic, "How Toys Become Real," does have an eerie ring.

What to make of this strange discovery — but that in literature, as in everything else, the most incongruous things have fewer degrees of separation than we think. ☞

—Stefan Dziemianowicz

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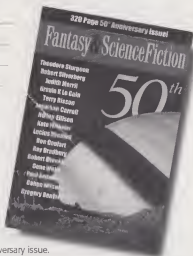
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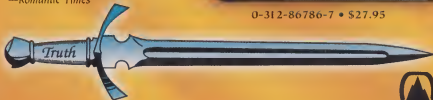
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